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**“HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER” or
“HONOR YOUR MOTHER AND FATHER?”:
A Case Study in Creole Bible Translation**

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We recognize also that there are many languages for which gender distinction in grammatical forms is not an issue, as the same form serves for both masculine and feminine. However, this feature of language does not necessarily mean that those language groups do not discriminate on the basis of gender in [the] other areas.

(Updated draft of a United Bible Societies Policy Statement on
Gender and Translation, 1997. Merida: Triennial Translation Workshop,
United Bible Societies)

The deeper implications of a “trivial” problem

Papiamentu, the Afro-Iberian Creole spoken on Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao, the windward islands, off the coast of Venezuela, is an example of a language where gender distinctions are not expressed grammatically. As with many other Creole languages, and Atlantic Creoles in particular, specific gender distinctions needed in communication are either expressed explicitly or are derived from the context. However, the translator encounters a very interesting gender issue, relating to word order, one which some might consider to be trivial. It is a case of reverse gender discrimination, i.e., the female preceding the male gender.

In Papiamentu the most natural order of the collocation “father and mother” is *mama i tata* (mother and father). This probably reflects the matriarchal or matrilineal nature of the Curaçao society, and in fact, of the whole region. The mother (grandmother, aunt, great-aunt) plays a pivotal role in the web of family and social relations. Even when both parents are still alive and have a good marriage, the children will usually speak not of “my father’s house,” but always of “my mother’s house.” The same is true for the grandmother and grandfather (*wela/tan-wela*).

When discussing the sensitivities surrounding the translation of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20.12; Deut 5.16) and the many references to them in the NT, this difference between the target language and the source language emerged. It had been taken for granted in other texts. The discussion in the Papiamentu translation team, working on the Papiamentu Common Language (PAPCL) translation, that is, the *Beibel Papiamentu Koriente* (1995), shows the complexity and sensitivity of the issue.¹ Given the liturgical significance of the Ten Commandments for several churches, what seemed to be a trivial matter soon became a rather crucial decision.

At first, following the aim of producing a natural translation, there was a general consensus to follow the natural *mother-father* word order. However, when reviewers from outside the translation team were told that the original order in Hebrew or Greek was often different, a heated debate developed. The underlying assumption in this discussion was that the natural order in Papiamentu reflects not only the preeminent role of women, but also—and perhaps more significantly—the lack of responsibility of the males (fathers) in the home. Thus the main question was whether the Bible translation, in following the natural language pattern, would not be endorsing the social reality of dysfunctional families, a reality caused by absentee and/or negligent fathers. In other words, the dilemma for the translation team was: Would not the translation be sanctioning this “deficient” image of manhood and fatherhood by the *mother-father* sequence? This was accepted as being the case, and consequently the biblical pattern (*father-mother*) was interpreted as providing a necessary corrective to the social situation. Of course, the discussion at that time did not take into account the oppression and suppression of the female in the official power structures of modern society! The possible benefits of a matrilineal representation in the Bible translation, even where exegetically acceptable, were not on the agenda of the team. It is by no means certain that following the Papiamentu word order is really the best way to communicate something positive about women. Of course, a formal equivalence translation would not have this problem since “naturalness” is not one of the objectives. This is indeed the case with *Beibel Santu*, a formal equivalence translation in Papiamentu. It faithfully reflects the order of the formally equivalent English translation from which it was translated, and thus, the Hebrew or Greek text.

¹ As a member of the team and the editorial commission, the writer shares the responsibility for the final product, which by all means has proven to be a good and useful translation, widely accepted in the community. In what follows I express my own opinions; the comments on possible improvements are constructive criticisms on a very intricate problem. And, of course, they come from reflection in hindsight.

Ultimately, in the second phase, the translation team chose to edit the relevant texts and leave the Hebrew ordering (*father-mother*), even though it would sound unnatural in the language. Summing up, this decision was based on three interrelated arguments:

- a. The team wished to avoid the misunderstanding that the translation, if it used the *mother-father* collocation, was condoning the stereotypical male attitude towards family life.
- b. This translation involves fewer adjustments to the original text.
- c. And last but not least, the cultural setting of the biblical texts was patriarchal, with a strong sociological focus on the role of the father, both spiritually as well as socially. To change the order would be to distort the social reality of the text for the sake of linguistic naturalness. However, if the normal default order (*father-mother*) in the original language is reproduced in translation, it will then be easier for the modern reader to evaluate the less-common form (*mother-father*) when it appears in the original language.

Practical solutions: *Tata i Mama* or *Mayornan*

In practice the policy just described resulted in the following practical decisions:

Maintain the original “patriarchal” order

Examples (NRSV):

- Gen 2.24 Therefore a man leaves *his father and his mother* [PAPCL: *su tata i mama*] and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.
- Deut 5.16 Honor your *father and your mother*, [PAPCL: *tata i mama*] as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

“*Mayornan*” (parents) as an alternative solution

Alternatively, in some (less well-known) passages “father and mother” has been translated as *mayornan* (parents). This solution has the benefit of putting the focus on the equal function of the partners towards their offspring, not focusing on either gender.

Examples:

- Deut 33.9 He [the men of the tribe of Levi] said of his *father and mother*, [PAPCL: *mayornan*] “I have no regard for them.” He did not recognize his brothers or acknowledge his own children, but he watched over your word and guarded your covenant.
- Luke 8.51 When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child’s *father and mother* [PAPCL: *mayornan*].

The reverse order in Lev 19.3

However, in Lev 19.3 there is one interesting passage where the Hebrew does follow the “Papiamentu order” (*mother-father*) and might be counterbalancing the dominant patriarchal nature of ancient Hebrew society. There are other locations, such as Gen 35.18; Lev 20.19; 21.2; and Ezek 16.45 where, in some way or other, *mother* precedes *father*. The first two passages, like 19.3, come from the Holiness Code in Leviticus, and so support the idea that the inversion in 19.3 is not accidental.

Chapter 19 of Leviticus contains a significant reformulation of the Decalogue, with a number of unique features. For example, the commandment about parents uses the verb *fear* instead of the more usual *honour* as in Exod 20.12, and Deut 5.16 (Hartley, 1992:312-3). However, it is the order in which information is presented that is most marked, as noted by Weinfeld (1991:243). The order of the commands referred to is reversed, moving from the 5th, to the 4th, and then to the 1st commandment. The order of the sentence is reversed (from *honour your father and mother* to *but [each] his father and mother shall you fear*). And to top it off, even the order of *his father and mother* is altered into *his mother and father*. Panc Beentjes (1996), among others, has drawn attention to this technique of what he calls “inverted quotations.” Although he does not reach a conclusion about its purpose, he is right in indicating its rhetorical significance and the need to preserve this in translation.

Verse 3 reads:

You shall each revere your *mother and father*, [PAPCL: *tata i mama*] and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.

Here the PAPCL follows other well-known modern translations in reversing the unusual order back to the more common Hebrew order (*tata-mama, father-mother*). The intention might have been to avoid the connotations of female prominence derived from the *mother-father* sequence in Papiamentu. This decision may have been reinforced by the example of other early translations: the Septuagint, different Targum manuscripts, and the Syriac have all inverted the order back to the normal *father-mother*. Interestingly the Qumran scrolls appear to have retained the *mother-father* order here (see Abegg et al., 1999:97), and so have some editions of the Vulgate. However it is most likely that the other ancient versions mentioned, have (perhaps unconsciously) favoured a male-oriented exegesis of the text. Thus, the possibility of a deliberate use of the unusual inversion by the writer or editor in the original language is not given proper weight in many modern translations (e.g. Contemporary English Version [CEV], French Common Language [French CL]).

Given the generally patriarchal nature of Semitic society one should not treat this unusual order lightly. Several sociocultural reasons have

been proposed for the *mother-father* order in Lev 19.3. They relate to the generally inferior position of women in ancient society:

- a. Concern with the lack of respect for the mother (Maarsing, 1974:162).
- b. Stress on the mother's role as the caretaker of the child. Because she plays an important role in religious education, she is granted the leading position (Gerstenberger, 1993:239; Hartley, 1992:313).
- c. Balancing of the traditional fifth commandment (Deut 5.16) to emphasize that both parents need to be respected and honored (Maarsing, *ibid*; Levine, 1989:125).
- d. Social concern for the economic position of the woman when she reaches old age (Hartley, *ibid*).

Thus, the suggestion that the inversion in Lev 19.3 is deliberate is not that far-fetched. It is generally accepted that Hebrew society had a strongly patriarchal structure where "[t]he father was the head of the [Hebrew] family in the OT with extensive rights. Quite probably in the early period the father possessed the power of life and death over his children" (McKenzie, 1966:274).

However, this does not mean that the Hebrew Scriptures express only a single view on gender roles. Mention has already been made of similar cases of inversion in Lev 20.19 and 21.2. Furthermore, for example, in the *Song of Songs* there is no mention of a father, but the mothers of the two lovers are mentioned seven times (Swidler, 1979:94):

The woman is called the "darling of her *mother*" (6.9).

Of the man, reference is made to "where your *mother* conceived you" (8.5).

The woman wishes the man had been her "brother nursed at my *mother's* breast" (8.1).

King Solomon is said to wear the crown "with which his *mother* crowned him" (3.11).

The woman's actual brothers are mentioned as "my *mother's sons*" (1.6).

In two places the woman takes the initiative by taking the man "into my *mother's* house" (3.4; 8.2). This sounds very much like the Papiamentu expression *kas di mi mama* (house of my mother) which is a linguistic reflection of our matriarchal society.

Whatever one believes about the relative dates of composition of the various biblical books, it is not strange for any society to show contradictory signs. Thus, a dominantly patriarchal society can have matriarchal elements and vice versa. In Ruth one finds a Moabite woman who becomes a follower of YHWH and shows loyalty to her mother-in-law. It is typical that although the story presumes the traditional

patriarchal structures (e.g., Levirate marriage), Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to go back to their “*mother’s house*.”

When it comes to the translation of Lev 19.3, the CEV, the Spanish Common Language translation (*Dios Habla Hoy*), the French CL (*Français Courant*), and as already mentioned PAPCL, all chose to “re-invert” the text. Unlike the Papiamentu translation, it could be that the other translations followed what is natural in their respective languages. This at least seems to be the case with the French, since the original French Translator’s Handbook on Leviticus, *Manuel du traducteur pour le livre du Lévitique* (Péter-Contesse, 1985) states that *father-mother* (*père-mère*) is the natural order in French. On the other hand, the English translation/adaptation of the same handbook recommends that, unless it is completely unnatural, the unusual word order should be retained, since it reflects the concern for the mother in the holiness code.

It is certainly true that the correction of the order *mother-father* to *father-mother* in different modern translations leads to the loss of a more female-oriented interpretation in the translated text. The best solution might be to not only maintain the Hebrew pattern, but to add a note indicating its unusual sequence, and the possible sociocultural implications and motivations. What is often considered “natural language” in many cases could very well be a patriarchal attitude which is interwoven into language use. In other words, one could turn the argument in the *Manuel du traducteur* on its head and assert that the inversion (*mother-father*) should be maintained in order to adequately communicate something about gender bias and prejudices. And this is especially true in languages like French, where the default order is like the Hebrew.

Anneke de Vries (1998:104) has rightly stated:

Of course, the structure of the Hebrew Bible contains many stereotyped descriptions of male and female participants. I think that these should be preserved if translations are to be accurate representations of their sources. There are many cases, however, where the source text is neutral, passages where stereotypes as we know them are only very weakly represented, and *even texts that contradict these preconceived ideas* (italics mine).

Leviticus 19.3 is surely one case where the more difficult reading, (i.e. *mother-father*) should be followed, exactly because it goes against the traditional pattern. This would be one example of “texts that contradict preconceived ideas” on gender.

For the PAPCL it would have been better, in hindsight, to have dealt with the issue in a note, explaining some of the relevant sociocultural implications of the original order and the way in which Lev 19.3 is a special case. Unfortunately, the natural collocation (*mother-father*) seems to be so natural that, contrary to the established policy to follow the Hebrew *father-mother* order, the Papiamentu *mother-father* still appears in, for example, Judg 14.9; Prov 23.25; Luke 2.33; 14.26; Matt 19.5; Mark

10.7, 19. And the last three cases, in the New Testament, are direct quotations from the Old Testament! This might serve as a warning for translators who are following an idiomatic approach, to be careful with constructions that are very much ingrained in the psyche of the translators. Furthermore, there is a great need in Bible translation circles to investigate the actual translation practice in published material so as to ascertain how translators actually work and apply agreed translation theory and policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the question of which word order to follow, turns out to be far from trivial. It is imperative for a translation in any language to take into account the fact that word order is also determined by sociocultural aspects. The advice to follow the language's natural order needs to be counterbalanced with the advice to investigate what the cultural implications of that order are. A completely satisfactory solution is probably unattainable, but an informed solution that takes all the different aspects into account is possible. This may require the insertion of a footnote to explain the sociocultural implications of the text.

The translator needs to take up the challenge not to permit his or her own ideological preconceptions to obstruct God's Word from speaking to human beings of all races, classes and genders. The margin of flexibility that the translator has is determined by the original text itself, the target language, and the goal of the translation. Of course, it is indisputable that God's revelation comes to us from within the concrete historical reality of a patriarchal society. But this should not obscure what is certainly for women a liberating message:

. . . God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them; (Gen 1.27,
male and female he created them. NRSV)

And

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, *male nor* (Gal 3.28,
female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. NRSV)

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TRANSLATING THE HEBREW OATH FORMULA: A Nepali Perspective

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Introduction

The Hebrew Bible contains many instances of an oath, or solemn promise, taken in the name of the LORD. In Hebrew the formula for the oath is simply *hay-yhwh*. This can be translated into English as "as the LORD lives," or more literally, "Yahweh is alive/living" or "(by) the life of Yahweh." Yet it is very difficult to translate into other languages in a way which conveys intelligible meaning. What does "as the LORD lives" mean in the Hebrew Scriptures? And what is its function? The way in which it is translated should vary with the syntax and the vocabulary of the context in which it is used. In this article I concentrate mostly on situations where the speaker is a human being, and have only dealt briefly with the oath formula or utterance in the first person where God himself is the speaker: "as surely as I live or "I am alive/living."

The scope of this study is further limited to regional languages that I have been working with in South and Southeast Asia, with primary emphasis on the Nepali language. In my experience as a translation consultant I have often found that translators are puzzled when it comes to translating the oath formula. The general tendency is to go for a literal translation, assuming that to do so legitimately reflects the Hebrew phenomenon. But the outcome is often a meaningless rendering. Even in English, the expressions "as the LORD lives" or "as surely as the LORD lives" do not convey the meaning of the Hebrew oath formula in its broadest sense.

Occurrence of the oath formula in the Old Testament

I have tabulated all occurrences of the oath formulas with the LORD and combinations of the LORD with expressions like God of Israel, your God, Almighty and the LORD. For comparison, I have taken four English versions, i.e., NIV, NRSV, TEV, and CEV.