

Figures of Speech in the Chol New Testament

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The literary critic Longinus wrote that one of the five characteristics of great literature is its liberal use of figures of speech. The Bible, as a work of literature, is no exception. By metaphor, simile, metonymy, analogy, and image, the Biblical writers taught with rich variety. For example, our Lord referred to Himself as a vine, a branch, a door, a fold, a road, a king, a shepherd, a sower, a thief in the night, a light, and the living bread. In appealing to feelings and associations, His one purpose was to reach living hearts in a way that cold intellect can never do. Some of the problems involved in the translation of figures of speech have already received attention in the pages of *The Bible Translator*. The aim of this article is to suggest certain principles which were found to be useful in handling many of the figures of speech in the Chol New Testament, which is scheduled to come off the press in 1957.

Figures of speech are frequently heard in Chol, a Mayan language spoken by approximately 30,000 Indians in the northern corner of the State of Chiapas in Mexico. When a village receives notice from the seat of local government that the men are to report for work, one may say, 'We are being grabbed'. A man who is addicted to drink confesses, 'Liquor pulls me a lot'. The word for 'pull' literally means 'to pull as with a rope'. One person said of some who talk very loudly, 'They lift their voices'. Another Indian in referring to experiences of embarrassment explained, 'We lower our eyes'.

A number of religious figures of speech are now common currency in some of the Chol congregations. To what extent they represent the influence of the missionaries' speech or the result of their own reflection upon their religious experience is difficult to determine. 'The whole world is in the hand of Jesus', came from one Indian preacher. In a service another prayed, 'Lay your hand on top of each one'. A non-Christian using an expression which is parallel to the New Testament figure of falling into reproach or condemnation confessed, 'I fell into sin'. The occurrence of such figures of speech in Chol was a help in the translation and also in preparing the minds of the people for new figures which had to be introduced. However, many of the Biblical figures were not understood and had to be altered, or the meaning translated.

Basic Principles

In an effort to preserve for the Chols the original meaning of difficult Biblical figures of speech, the following four principles were formulated by the translators together with Dr. Eugene A. Nida and Dr. William L. Wonderly. Either singly or in combination, they were found to help provide an answer to the question of how to render such figures so as to be understandable, or when to retain them unaltered, as the case may be.

1. Metaphor to Simile

Where the literal translation of a metaphor produces difficulty for a

number of readers, or results in a distortion of the Biblical meaning, a simile may be substituted for the metaphor.

The metaphor of a living sacrifice in Romans 12:1 was changed to a simile: '...give God your bodies like a killed gift although you are living yet'. Other figures were handled by the addition of a Chol word *yilal* 'it appears'. The Chol of Hebrews 7:3 reads: 'There isn't his father or mother, it appears. Not taken the names of his ancestors. There isn't his beginning, it appears. There isn't his end, it appears. He is the picture of the Son of God. He is priest forever'.

The analogy "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain" (Romans 8:22) is difficult because the Chols do not ordinarily ascribe personal characteristics to that which is inanimate. This again was handled by the addition of 'it seems'. 'We know that together is groaning everything which is made. It is travailing, it seems, until now'. However, every occurrence of groaning and travailing could not be handled in the same way. Each figure had to be examined for informant reaction in the light of its immediate context. A 'groaning Spirit' in Romans 8:26 would have conveyed the impression that the Spirit was in death throes. So it was translated: 'with sadness of heart of the Spirit'.

Romans 6:4 has a metonymy, part of which was changed to a simile in translation. 'Like in taking water (Chol expression for baptism) we were buried with Christ, as if we were dead'.

2. Biblical Metaphor to Indigenous Metaphor

A figure of speech in current use, or understood by the Chols, may be substituted for the Biblical figure.

In instances where it was found necessary to substitute a known figure for the Biblical figure, the translators had before them the ideal of using figures in current use, but they were not often fortunate enough to find such figures. The next best thing was to use figures which were readily understood. Such a substitution was made for "yoke" in Matthew 11:29: 'Hang on your head my *tajbal*' (the *tajbal* is a tumpline, used for carrying heavy loads on the back, suspended in part by a band across the forehead). This form of expression is not in use among the Chols as a figure of speech, but it is lifelike and graphically clear in meaning because every Indian constantly uses a *tajbal*.

A similar substitution was made in Luke 11:16 for "a sign from heaven," making it 'a picture of His power from heaven'. An adaptation of the same Chol figure was used to explain "cup" in Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:36, and Luke 22:42. Whatever the precise meaning of "cup" may be in these verses may never be agreed upon, but in the LXX it is used metaphorically of adversity and divine punishment. In these verses we used a Spanish borrowing *vaso* 'glass' and added the explanatory phrase, 'which is the picture of *wocol*'. *Wocol* has a rather wide range of meaning, including affliction, trial, punishment, and retribution. The term *vaso* was preferred to *copa*, which is regularly used by Spanish-speaking Christians, since Chol Christians understand *copa* to be a small glass of intoxicating drink. The term *tsima*, a local drinking vessel, might

have served, but since *vaso* has come into use in their communion services, we decided to use it in the above-cited verses and in 1 Corinthians 10:16.

The problem of multiple meanings is often involved in the rendering of figures. Some hold that Greek *katelaben* in John 1:5 means both 'to grasp with the mind' (i.e., 'to comprehend') and 'to grasp with the hand' (i.e., 'to overcome').¹ Many translators are obliged to make a choice here. The American Standard Version and the Cipriano de Valera chose 'comprehend', while the Revised Standard Version and the Latino-americana chose 'overcome'. In Chol there is no choice, since the darkness cannot comprehend, even metaphorically speaking. It was therefore rendered: 'The darkness did not put out the light'.

3. Metaphor to Non-Metaphor

The meaning of the figure may be translated in a nonfigurative, descriptive manner.

When a metaphor or other figure was found, through informant checks, to be misunderstood and could not be handled by converting to a simile or changed to a figure in use or to a figure understood by the people, it was then rendered descriptively, translating the meaning of the figure.

Anthromorphisms may be easily misunderstood by Chol readers. The expression "the Holy Spirit fell on them," in Acts 10:44 and 11:15, is understood by some as referring to a bodily fall of the Spirit. Because of the literal-minded reader it was rendered: 'The Holy Spirit was given in their hearts'. This change was not made without misgivings, however, for as someone else has observed, there is always an element of uncertainty in exegesis.

The word *charaktêr* in Hebrews 1:3 was the word used for the impression on a coin or seal. Since the nearest Chol term 'picture' is inadequate, the phrase "the very image of His substance" was translated: 'He is the one who reveals Him'.

Another illustration of translating a figure in a nonfigurative manner is the treatment of *chriô* 'anoint'. In Luke 4:18, Acts 4:27 and 10:38, and in 2 Corinthians 1:21 it is metaphorical of consecration to office by God. We translated the metaphor 'choose'.

The Apostle Paul uses a variety of physical and organic metaphors to express the conception of Christ's relationship to the Church. A number of these caused considerable difficulty. No simple formula was found to handle them, as the following listing will show:

1. Galatians 4:19, 'My children, just like a woman who is in travail, I am again suffering for you, until is revealed the power of Christ in your hearts'. Note that the first part of the figure is changed to a simile and that the last part is translated descriptively and not without a loss, for it is much more than the 'power of Christ' that is formed within the believer.
2. Romans 7:14, 'You are dead, it seems, in order that you may not

¹Moule, C. F. D.: *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1953, p. 197.

continue to obey the law because Christ gave His body to death. You are no longer responsible to obey the law. Therefore you may find another your master...' Here the figure was changed from being joined to another spouse to finding another master.

3. 1 Corinthians 6:17, 'He who enters into our Lord enters into one person with our Lord'. The figure was changed from the physical relation to a spatial figure of 'entering into'.
4. Ephesians 4:24, 'It wants that we take our new heart'. This translation assumes that the text speaks of a better self which each person puts on individually. Others, with the support of Galatians 3:27, prefer to say that it is the one Man which all believers put on as a corporate entity. Translating the figure descriptively in this case resulted in a possible gain in intelligibility at the cost of precluding the possibility of drawing the alternate interpretation from the Chol text.

A figure which makes use of an organic category to illustrate the truth of the theology of the body in Ephesians and Colossians is that of the headship of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:3 "head" is a metaphor carrying the idea of authority. In Chol it is translated, 'The lord of every man is Christ'. In all other references where Paul applies the term *kephalē* to Christ the idea of authority is closely connected with an organic sense. In Ephesians 1:22, 4:15, 5:23, and Colossians 1:18 and 2:19 *kephalē* expresses the two ideas of authority and headship. But only in Ephesians does the Chol translation preserve the literal term 'head'. In the other references it is rendered 'lord', thus retaining the idea of 'power', as in 1 Corinthians 11:3, but losing the concept of the corporal relationship of Christ and the church. The expression 'Christ is the lord of the Church' affirms His authority over the Church, but it says nothing as to His organic connection with the Church. An understandable effort to make sense for the Indians out of a difficult figure resulted in eliminating Paul's doctrine of the organic connection of Christ and the body of believers in the instances where this figure was so translated.

4. Retention of Difficult Metaphors

A figure of speech which produces difficulty may be advisedly retained if it is a figure which is widely employed in the Bible, or is explained in the context, or is one having special theological implications.

One instance of a difficult, but theologically significant, metaphor occurs in John 12:32, where a New Testament antitype of an Old Testament type or symbol is given. The expression, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth' proved to be not generally understood by Chol readers. The committee was therefore tempted to render it, 'And I, if I be lifted up on a cross'. But the figure is both an antitype of the brazen serpent and a revelation of a "lifting up" of the Son of Man by a method that is not made clear. Therefore the figure was retained. The disciples did not understand this figure until some time after it was uttered. If a Chol reader puzzles over its meaning, he will, if he continues reading, find John's eye-witness account of the "lifting up" in chapters 19 and 20.

The idea of being "with" Christ is not expressed any more satisfactorily in Chol than in English. In Chol, as in English, it is expressed as an external, contiguous relationship rather than one of identity, as in the Greek of Romans 6:4 and Galatians 2:20 where we have the expressions "buried with Christ" and "crucified with Christ."

The spatial metaphors by which Paul expresses the organic relationship of Christ and the believer did not cause a great deal of trouble and were usually not changed. Chol has a preposition *ti* which has a wide range of use, including 'in', 'into', 'to', 'from', 'at', 'on'. This preposition is used to express the concepts of "in Christ" and "in us."

Another important type of figure used by Paul of the Church, the structural metaphor, was retained without difficulty, e.g., 1 Corinthians 3:9, 'the house of God'; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 'the temple of God'; Ephesians 2:22, 'together you are made one dwelling where God dwells by the Spirit'; and 1 Corinthians 6:19, 'Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit'.

Probably not one of the translators or consultants would claim that through use of the above principles all of the difficulties were dispelled or all of the problems solved. Nevertheless, they did give confidence that they were workable principles which were a help in providing Chol readers with the meaning of many Biblical figures of speech.

Translation Pitfalls

There are no tribespeople who understand Vietnamese well enough to translate the Bible correctly from that language into their tribal tongue. One of my student preachers translated *vi chung* 'because' as *vi cái chon* 'because the foot'; *vi sao* 'why' as *vi ngôi sao* 'because a star'; *tai sao* 'why' as *o noi ngôi sao* 'on a star'.

Pham Xuan Tin

Queer Shorthand But It Works

When in 1928 Ataturk forced a nation to abandon the Arabic form of writing Turkish, this master stroke was praised by all those who were acquainted with the absurd way in which the Arabic script misrepresented the Turkish sounds. At last it was possible for a nation to advance toward full literacy, and it has. But Ataturk did not know that he was leaving behind a fine competitor for Gregg.

Since Arabic does not indicate vowels, and many consonants may be written with fast flowing lines, numerous people kept right on using the Arabic script as shorthand, despite the fact that they had to write the Arabic "shorthand" from right to left. This does not mean that Arabic is the steno's answer to "shorthand nightmare", but it proved to be a good ready-made by-product of an interesting revolution.