

Some Problems in Translating Paragraphs Idiomatically

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In 1951 I finished translating the Gospel of Mark into the Shipibo language, spoken in the eastern jungles of Peru. My indispensable helpers were two Shipibo Christians, Elias Sanchez and Amancio Barbaran. They were intelligent men, leaders in the local church, but did not know Spanish very well. And naturally, they knew no Greek. But they were the best men available.

After the first draft we rechecked and revised the manuscript three times. In successive revisions the work became more and more monolingual as we left off discussing translation problems in Spanish and discussed the meanings entirely in Shipibo, further clarifying them by pointing or by acting out the situation. We followed this same procedure to get differences and overlaps in meaning between different words and turns of expression. At first, the word order had been largely that of Spanish, but in the discussion a more natural word order developed. This made me feel we were doing a good job and that each sentence was a model of grammatical and syntactic correctness.

Yet, I had two problems which haunted me and which I could not resolve. One was that I could never find out the difference in meaning between two past tenses. When I tried to work it out with my two translation helpers, they always told me that the two tenses meant the same. In the end I just had to write one or the other tense as dictated to me.

The other problem was to keep proper track of all the subjects and objects and possessives throughout the whole translation. Many times I found that using a pronoun where Spanish or Greek had a pronoun made the particular subject, object, or possessive refer to somebody else. Either I had to use no pronoun at all, or else use the noun. In the final draft I checked all the subjects, objects, and possessives throughout the translation with my helpers and made sure to what and to whom they referred. Where the meaning went wrong, they would help me find the proper form.

Still, in spite of this practical help, I felt very uneasy, as I myself did not hold the clue as to how the system worked. Many times, as I would hear the Shipibos speak, I would get mixed up as to whom they were talking about in a particular sentence. In 1954, before I started work again on translating other books of the New Testament, I took off two months to try and work out the system of pronominal reference.

I took an intelligent Conibo I had never worked with before (Shipibos and Conibos speak practically indistinguishable dialects of the same language), and asked him to tell me some past happenings of his people. This he dictated to me, phrase by phrase, in his own language, some fifty pages of text material. Then I turned around and read the text back to him, sentence by sentence. After each sentence, if the subject

was not expressed or was a pronoun, I would ask, "Who did it?" in his language. If the object of the sentence was a pronoun or simply not expressed, I would ask, "To whom did he (or she, or it, etc.) do it?" And if a pronoun was used as a possessive, I would ask, "Whose was it?" specifying the word modified by the possessive. And as he would answer with the specific name or noun, I would write it under the proper place in the sentence. After three or four sentences of this, he asked me, "Don't you understand what I said here? I really made it very plain." And I replied, "Yes, I partly know what it says, but not completely. You see, we don't talk this way in my language, and when I try to understand it according to the custom of my language, I make many mistakes." And so we went, all through the material he had dictated to me.

With some 250 sentences of connected text material and my inter-linear notations on the antecedent of each pronoun and unexpressed subject or object, I worked out the main outlines of the system, though some details still have to be worked out more fully. A tremendous amount depended on the conjunctive elements that introduced most sentences. Some conjunctions meant: "This sentence has the same subject as the preceding." Other conjunctions meant: "This sentence does not have the same subject as the preceding." With these it was necessary to follow an elaborate set of "rules" to find out just what *was* the antecedent of the subject. Still other conjunctions had even more complicated meanings.

Third person pronouns were used very sparingly, and many times in the sense of "the other individual, not the one you logically expect here." There were even special "rules" for picking out one individual as subject out of a previously mentioned plural subject, and for conjoining two or more previously mentioned individuals into a single plural subject. It was only at points like these and others of special emphasis that one of the past tenses that bothered me was used. The other past tense was never used this way and was a simple narrative nonemphatic tense. Thus I resolved my tense problem.

By this procedure I found out how to understand who and what was being talked about in each particular sentence. I even went over material I had not analyzed and found that I could now trace the antecedents of each pronoun and unexpressed subject or object very easily.

Very much encouraged, I went back to translation with a couple of other helpers, since the first two were no longer available. I had not gone very far before I found out that between two sentences I apparently had a choice of conjunctive elements. I tried to find out from my helpers which to use, and sometimes they told me that only one choice was possible. Other times there *was* a choice for some obscure reason, and sometimes they could not make up their minds which to use.

I also discovered that my new-found rules of interpretation did not tell me how to use pronouns and leave items unexpressed, nor where. I really had only solved half my problem, that of understanding (i.e. interpretation, or decoding). I still had the problem of how to say or write it in the first place (i.e. construction, or encoding). So, while I did

further tentative translation, I went back to the text material, took 1,000 sentences of connected text, and started work. The two questions I now put to myself were: (1) How do I know which conjunction to use in a particular case? and (2) How do I know whether to use a noun or a pronoun or leave it unexpressed in any one particular context?

After quite a bit of work on the material, I discovered that each conjunctive element had a different part to play in carrying on the train of thought, argument, or action from sentence to sentence. In fact, paragraph after paragraph of text material showed definite logical structures, whose parts were signaled by the conjunctive elements. Not only that, but even sentence structure was affected. In the text a quotation of paragraph length could be expressed as a single, long, involved sentence, e.g. *He went with his son to the lake in order to fish*. In narration, however, this same material was chopped up into: *He went with his son; went to the lake; went in order to fish*.

Then I looked back at how we had translated the Gospel of Mark and was appalled at what I read there. It now looked so stilted and unnatural. In many cases, the wrong conjunctive elements had been used and the train of thought either partially obliterated or completely destroyed. Individual sentences were understandable, but many of them had too much crammed into them; they had been treated as paragraph-length declarative quotations, and not as narrative. On my own, I concluded the translation would be hard to read and follow.

I did not have long to wait for the proof. At first everybody was pleased and uncritical with the Shipibo Gospel of Mark when it came out in 1954. But as time went on, complaints started coming in. Finally, one man, Victor Franco, the Conibo interpreter at one station of the South American Indian Mission, became articulate and could tell some of what was wrong with it. He spoke to the missionaries about it, and they in turn contacted me and said he would like to help me revise it. I accepted his help with delight, and we have begun a very fruitful partnership in translation. Just before I came to the United States on furlough last year, we started revising the Gospel of Mark, and what a change! The result was bell-clear and beautifully structured; a work of art, speaking to these Indians' souls in the normal speech they use when they talk with their fellow tribesmen.

Now, in theory, I have set up a "recipe" for translating the paragraph structure idiomatically. This "recipe" divides the translation process into steps. We start with the language material to be translated, and the end result is a good, meaningful translation. These steps are very roughly described as follows:

1. We take material in the original language and replace all third person pronouns, etc., by nouns or names.

2. We break all sentences up into series of clauses without conjunctions. We add interlinear notations as to the relations of each clause in the logical structure.

3. We translate the clauses into Shipibo.

4. We rearrange the order of certain clauses where needed to make a more natural order, and we break up or combine clauses where needed to make it natural in Shipibo.

5. We introduce Shipibo conjunctions on the basis of the interlinear notations.

6. In terms of "rules," we replace nouns at certain points by pronouns, or even drop them entirely; this to convey the same meaning in the most natural and unstilted way.

Translation and Revision in India

H. K. Moulton

A general survey of translation and revision work in India today covers very wide ground. The 1951 census report lists 782 languages, but as 378 of these are spoken by less than a hundred people, they may be disregarded.¹

The Bible Society of India and Ceylon has 95 language files on hand, out of which about 50 may be said to be in various conditions of activity. A recent survey has shown that translations of the Scriptures (in whole or part) serve 98 per cent of the population in their mother tongues, and that many of the remaining two per cent do not need translations, as they are literate in a neighboring tongue. Work on six new languages has, however, begun during 1955 and 1956.

This article will concern itself with two main groups of languages: (1) the languages of Assam, now one of the strongest Christian areas in India, where the older and larger linguistic groups are completing, and even revising, their Bibles, while the newer Christians, particularly the various Naga tribes, are beginning with one Gospel or working forward to a complete New Testament and even into the Old Testament; and (2) the major languages of India, where old, established versions are now being revised in accordance with the standard Greek text of today and so that their language may be in line with that spoken by the modern educated Indians of their region. Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Santali, and others come in this category; and it must not be forgotten that this work has already been done (for the time being) in Tamil, Kannada, Gurumukhi, Urdu, and other tongues.

Hindustani and Urdu

A most interesting project which does not come under any of these categories is Hindustani. In many areas of the north, there has for centuries been an overlapping of Urdu, with its Persian script and Muslim background, and Hindi, with its Devanagari script and Hindu

¹ Quite a number are listed as being spoken by only one person. How nice to have no one who can contradict you!