

Translation and Word Frequency

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The exegete and the translator are always confronted with the task of properly evaluating the significance of a term. This problem is especially acute in treating words which have very high frequencies of occurrence, for it is a basic principle of semantics that the greater the area of meaning and the more frequent a term occurs the less it actually signifies in any given context. For example, in English the words *thing*, *item*, and *object* cover such a wide range of meanings and occur in so many utterances that in any one context they add very little to the significance of the passage. In a sense they are semantic and grammatical "fillers."

In translating the New Testament the problem of meaning and frequency becomes important in our treatment of the conjunctions, especially *kai* and *de*. Should the translator attempt to reproduce every conjunction, despite the fact that in English these conjunctions do not occur with anything like the same frequency? Or should he attempt to reflect the same kind of appreciation for the idiomatic style of English as the writers of the New Testament did for Greek?

Traditionally it has been thought necessary to translate most, if not all, of the conjunctions, but note the comments in R. F. Weymouth, *The N.T. in Modern Speech*, pp. xii-xiii. Of the first two chapters of Mark, which in the Nestle (twenty-first edition) contain 62 full sentences (this does not include some of the paratactically related short questions), 52 sentences begin with *kai*, five others begin with postpositive *de*, and one begins *alla*. There are only four sentences which have no introductory connective. The high preponderance of *kai* may be in some measure a reflection of Semitic *waw* (other Gospel writers show greater diversity and in their use of connectives more closely parallel current literary standards), but the abundant use of sentence connectives, though not the preponderance of *kai*, is not out of keeping with the style of classical writers. Of the first forty sentences in Plato's *Republic* only six are without some type of connective, of which *de*, *oun*, and *kai* are the most frequent. In the first twenty sections of Isocrates' *On the Peace* every sentence but the first has some type of conjunction, either as the first word or as postpositive to the introductory expression. Of the 55 paragraphs which make up the treatise *On the Peace* all but the first begin with some type of connective, of which *de* occurs in 22, *oun* in 12, and other connectives in the remaining 20 paragraphs.

Of course, no writer of English even closely approximates this form of style. In some selected writings of John Ruskin (reproduced in *Twelve Centuries of English Poetry and Prose*, published by Scott, Foresman, and Company) out of the first 35 sentences only four begin with connectives. Out of a total of 32 paragraphs, 26 begin without connectives, two begin with *and*, two with *now* (in a conjunctive, not temporal use), and one each with *for* and *however*. Furthermore, it must

be remembered that Ruskin employed a very "heavy" style, greatly influenced by the classical tradition. James Truslow Adams in his book *The Adams Family* (published by Little, Brown, and Company, 1930) employs conjunctions to begin only two sentences out of the first 32. Of the first 66 paragraphs only eight have connectives. Of the first 250 sentences of *The Robe* by Lloyd C. Douglas only 17 begin with connectives: *but* and *and* six times each, *then* (in conjunctive use) four times, and *now* once.

Because of this discrepancy between English and Greek those who have undertaken to translate secular literature have more or less followed the stylistic equivalent of English. That is to say, they have eliminated the numerous connectives, which are perfectly acceptable in Greek but which seem tedious, repetitious, and childish in English.

However, in the translation of the New Testament there are two distinct traditions. One type of translation preserves such conjunctions and the other does not. In the first two chapters of Mark the King James text translates sentence-initial *kai* by *and* 49 times. Only once (Mark 2:17) does the King James fail to translate a conjunction in the original. However, the King James does employ some variation. *Kai* is rendered *now* in two verses; *de* is translated four times as *but* and once as *and*; *alla* is rendered *but*. The English Revised Version translates *kai* as *and* 51 times and as *now* once; *de* is rendered *but* three times and *now* and *and* once each; *alla* is translated *but*. Note that the ASV systematically translates every conjunction. The Revised Standard Version, which preserves the tradition of the King James and the Revised Versions, renders sentence-initial *kai* as *and* 42 times, as *now* three times, and as *but* once; *de* is translated as *now* twice and *but* once; *alla* is rendered as *but*. The RSV fails to translate 8 of the sentence-initial conjunctions of the Greek text, but in reproducing 50 out of 58 occurrences of conjunctions in a total of 66 sentences (i.e. of the RSV text), it is definitely not a modern-speech translation, nor was it intended to be. In contrast with the work of the British committee, which is undertaking a completely new and modern-speech translation, the RSV committee endeavored to preserve as much as possible of the general style and flavor of the King James and the American Standard Version (1901).

A comparison with translations produced by Weymouth, Moffatt, Phillips, and Rieu will indicate clearly the distinction between the traditional translations and modern-speech ones. In the same first two chapters of Mark, Weymouth reproduces only 25 occurrences of sentence-initial *kai*: 14 are translated as *and*, four as *so*, two each as *then*, *one day*, and *but*, and one as *now*; *de* is rendered as *now* in two occurrences and as *but* in one; *alla* is not translated. In total, Weymouth only reproduces 28 of the 58 occurrences of conjunctions.

Moffatt, who is in general somewhat closer to the usage of modern English, renders sentence-initial *kai* as *and* 12 times, as *now*, *then*, and *so* four times each, and as *but* twice; *de* is translated once as *but* and another time as *now*. Moffatt's total is also 28 translations of conjunctions.

Phillips, who has undertaken a very free translation but one which often comes closer to the sense of the original than does a more "faith-

ful rendering," translates sentence-initial *kai* a total of only 14 times: *then* seven times, *and* five times, *so* and *but* once each; *de* is rendered as *but* three times. Phillips reproduces a total of only 17 conjunctions.

E. V. Rieu, who has made an excellent translation of *The Four Gospels* (Penguin Books, 1952), reproduces sentence-initial *kai* as *and* four times and as *so*, *but*, and *then* once each; *de* is translated twice as *now* and once as *but*—giving a total of only 10 instances in which conjunctions in the original are reproduced in the English text. Rieu, who is himself a well-known classical scholar, reflects the manner in which the classics are generally rendered into modern English.

In order to understand the differences between the traditional and the modern-speech translations, we must consider some fundamental principles of semantic correspondence. If, as in Greek, almost every sentence must begin with a conjunction, it soon becomes evident that such a particle does not have the significance that it would have if such conjunctions were rare. In Greek the conjunctions *de*, *oun*, and *kai* were reduced almost to sentence markers, i.e. they indicated the beginning of a new clause. The science of Information Theory (the basis of modern electronic communication) has made it clear that the greater the predictability of a form the less it "signals" (or signifies) in any given context. In Greek one can predict with a high degree of accuracy that a sentence will begin with some connective, and the fact that one can predict the occurrence of such connectives means that they signify very little. In the first two chapters of Mark (and to a considerable extent throughout the rest of the NT) there are about 15 chances to one that a sentence will begin with a connective, but in English (as computed from the samples which we have listed just above) there are approximately 15 chances to one that a sentence will not have a connective. Accordingly, a connective in English carries several times as much "signalling power" (i.e. meaning) as it does in Greek.¹ This means that in reproducing all or most of the conjunctions in the Greek text a translator is actually overtranslating, for he is using words which have much less frequency in English (and hence much more significance) to translate words which have much greater frequency in Greek (and hence much less meaning). One who insists on translating all the conjunctions, on the grounds that he is "faithful" to the original, is actually guilty of mistranslating, for he is not employing equivalent constructions.

However, in rendering all the conjunctions a translator not only fails to reproduce the equivalent semantic values, but he introduces an unnatural stylistic flavor, which can be very tedious and insipid in English (the kind of style for which any modern writer would be severely censured). Such a style gives a wrong impression, for the literary form of the original is plain, straightforward, idiomatic, and certainly natural. In reproducing all the conjunctions, the "literal" translator becomes guilty on two charges: (1) of using words which

¹The writer recognizes that the application of the principles of Information Theory to this type of problem is far more complex than is implied in these statements, but in order to avoid a highly involved explanation, the basic relationships are stated in this "overly simplified" manner.

are not equivalent in semantic value, and (2) introducing a stylistic form which is contrary to the value of the original.

Translating is not a technique for producing strings of supposedly corresponding words. Rather, it consists in reproducing the closest natural equivalent, first in meaning and secondly in style.

A New Edition of the Hebrew Old Testament

It is ninety-two years since the British and Foreign Bible Society published its first Hebrew Bible. It is known as the Letteris Bible, and it has been printed again and again and again. It has had a great vogue, and because of its clear and shapely type, it has been a favourite among Jews and Christians alike. The late Chief Rabbi Hertz preferred it to all other editions and he used it in his five-volume commentary on the Pentateuch and the Haftorahs.

Meir Halevi Letteris was born in Austria in 1800 and died in Vienna in 1871. He was descended from an Amsterdam family of printers, was for some years a "reader" in printing houses in Berlin and Presburg, librarian in the Oriental Department of the Imperial Library, Vienna, and had a great reputation as a translator and writer of Hebrew songs. In 1852 he prepared a two-volume Hebrew Bible on the basis of the text of Van der Hoogt. The 1866 Letteris Bible is partly a revision of the 1852 text, but is influenced largely by MS. Erfurt 3.

In the first decade of this century the Society published a text edited by C. D. Ginsburg. This text was a revision of a text he edited for the Trinitarian Bible Society in Vienna in 1894. Both texts were based on the first edition of Jacob ben Chayim's text, printed by Bomberg at Venice in 1524-5, being the second edition of the Rabbinic Bible. The Ginsburg Bible contains readings of 75 manuscripts and 19 editions up to the 1524-5 Bomberg Bible. Dr. Ginsburg took no note of the first hand of any manuscript, and followed almost entirely Jacob ben Chayim's recension, which was believed by all until latterly to represent the true Masoretic text of Ben Asher. The Ginsburg text never achieved popularity, partly because of the size of the volumes, which were rendered quite cumbersome because of all the variants which were listed, and partly because Ginsburg seems to have thought that he could decide on the sounder reading simply by a majority, irrespective of the history and type of the manuscript or edition.

Masoretic studies have been transformed in latter years by the researches of Professor Paul Kahle, the editor of the text of the third edition of the Kittel Bible, published in 1937 by the Württemberg Bible Society. This third edition of the Kittel Bible has its text based on the Leningrad MS. which Dr. Kahle holds to represent the master-codex of Ben Asher himself.

In 1933 the Society decided to publish a new text to replace the