

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

The new Finnish translation of the Holy Scriptures

The following report is an edited version of part of a presentation given during 1987 by Bishop Aimo T. Nikolainen of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, concerning a new translation of the Bible in Finnish. That presentation went on to give many examples of renderings in the new translation which vary from the present Church Bible; but they are not included here, since they often require an understanding of Finnish to get the point at issue.

Whenever the need for a new translation of the Bible in Finnish has been discussed, we have heard the demand "The Bible must not be changed!" And all of us agree with that sentiment. But we also understand that the Bible will not be "changed", if a new translation approaches the actual content of the Old and New Testament writings more closely than the present translation. In fact, the Bible has already been changed, if any of its words or sentences is translated differently from what the prophetic and apostolic writers meant, or if the actual translation uses words or expressions which have got a new meaning in present-day language, different from the meaning they had when the translation was made. The Bible is also in danger of change if its words are misunderstood, or if the translators have used terms which are ambiguous or difficult to understand.

In our situation it has also been said very strongly that the churches have the right to set their aims and goals for a new translation; and this implies that the translation work could be carried out in many different ways. Again, we agree with this principle. But the very first paragraph of our Church Law states that the prophetic and apostolic scriptures of the Bible are to be regarded as the Word of God, and this Word of God is the only norm by which the faith and life of the Church is to be directed. This means that the Word of God dominates the Church, and not the other way round. And this principle binds a Translation Committee to search out, as far as possible, the original texts of the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the original meaning of these writings.

When the decision was taken to go ahead with a new translation of the Bible in Finnish, the Translation Committee was given **four tasks**:

- (1) The Committee is to determine the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament texts from which the translation will be made. This task is easier than it was in earlier times, because our Church Assembly made a decision of principle at the beginning of this century. According to that decision, the present Church Bible was translated from the oldest Hebrew Old Testament text, the so-called *masoretic text*, and from the scientific Nestle edition of the Greek New Testament. Of course there have been many advances in knowledge from Bible

research during the past 50 years; and so the new Committee now has better possibilities than the previous committee to get closer to the original texts, particularly for the New Testament.

- (2) The Committee is to determine how this text of the Bible is to be understood; that is, what the biblical writers meant by their sentences and expressions. We cannot begin the work of translation unless we have first explained for ourselves the right content and meaning of the words which the writers used. We know that the words of the biblical writers have later on been explained in many different ways: and some people may be satisfied with the later explanations, because they give support to their own ideas. But in this new translation we want to reach not only the original text of the biblical writers but also the original meaning of their written message. And that will be possible only through much study and hard work on the Bible. There is no short cut to this knowledge!
- (3) Next comes the actual translation work from Hebrew and Greek to Finnish. Our Committee is commissioned to translate the Hebrew and Greek texts into good modern Finnish, language which is able to be understood by the whole Finnish nation and not only by church people or biblical experts. It has been laid down that on the one hand we are not to use any special Bible language, but on the other hand not any restricted or simplified form of Finnish, not to mention anything too colloquial. Other organisations are free to produce easy-to-read everyman's Bibles, but the Church wants to get a new Bible which reflects a good and rich modern Finnish. Some old biblical terms will be preserved; our main intention, however, is to use language which follows the structure and characteristic features of Finnish. In the past, and until the present day, our Bible has used a Greek-Latin-German-Swedish Finnish, not pure Finnish!
- (4) The last, but not the least, task is to take account of all responses, including criticisms, to the draft texts which are circulated to show how the Committee is going about its work. A special Reference Group of 70 persons has been appointed, which is asked to give its reactions, both positive and negative, to the preliminary translation of all the books produced by the Committee. Every member of the Reference Group receives a copy of each book. Besides this official Reference Group there are other less official groups representing different churches. (The other churches besides the Evangelical Lutheran Church also have representatives on the Translation Committee.) The Committee also receives a good deal of response and criticism from the general community, because we have already published a number of nicely produced books containing our stage two translations.

When the secretaries of the Committee have collected all the responses to our draft translations, they are dealt with first by a small group of Committee members, and then notable or significant responses go to a

meeting of the full Committee. The Committee then decides whether to make changes to the draft text in response to the suggestions: and this happens fairly often! We do not have any doubt about the competence of our Committee. It is a good selection of professors and experts in the biblical languages, in Old and New Testament exegesis, and in the Finnish language, together with some well-known writers and poets. But we do not belong to the school of Pontius Pilate who said, "What I have written stays written"! We admit that even a correct translation should be corrected or improved, if it is understood wrongly or defectively; the Committee has to find a translation which is clearer or more understandable, without going back to the present Church Bible.

REVIEW

The following review of a piece of computer software was received recently. With many translation teams making use of computers, this is bound to be of interest to some.

As a Bible translator and editor of material written in vernacular languages, I would like to recommend U-SPELL, a "universal" spelling checker especially designed to deal with any language with any orthographic and/or keyboard conventions. I am currently using it, with great satisfaction, to check spelling in three different languages (each with its own set of files), among them Dida, a West African language with complex orthographic conventions. A recent experience, when fifty mistakes were found in a booklet previously declared "error free" by two experienced reviewers, convinced me of the need for a spelling checker.

U-SPELL has a dynamic dictionary (one per language) which keeps building up as new information is processed. You need not start from scratch as there is a simple way to incorporate any word list or error free text that you may actually have into the dictionary.

Basically, U-SPELL will extract words, one by one, from the file to check. Word extraction (punctuation, exclusion or inclusion of supra-segmental markers, word-breaks, capitals . . .) is done according to what you have decided for that particular language. You have all the freedom. It is this very feature which puts U-SPELL in a class apart among spelling checkers. For example, if you are dealing with a language with tone markers, with unstable tones contextwise, you may choose to exclude the tone markers from the words.

Words which are unmatched in the dictionary are flashed onto the screen, and you are given the following choices regarding each:

<INSERT> <SKIP> <MARK>