

SOME PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

N. ADRIANI

This article has been translated and adapted from the Dutch. It is taken from the Collected Writings of the author, published in 1932, after his death, but was first given as a lecture to fellow missionaries in 1900. The matters discussed here are equally relevant to translation today. Ed.

When I was still in Holland preparing for my present work of Bible translator, sometimes one or other well-meaning Christian would encourage me with the remark that the Eastern languages would doubtless be very suitable for translating the Bible into, the Bible itself being such an Eastern book! I shall certainly not need to free you from the misconception that all peoples with a brown skin who go barefoot can be lumped together as "Eastern"! There are in every language certain happy expressions which coincide with expressions in the Bible, but these do not diminish the difficulty of the task which the Bible translator faces. Below I discuss several principles which I believe to be of importance in facing difficulties of Bible translation.

The indigenous language

When translating the Bible, it is the language into which one is translating which counts most.

This is a general principle of translation valid for other kinds of translation besides Bible translation. For example, a translation from Dutch into French should be made by a Frenchman who knows Dutch; and a translation from French into Dutch should be made by a Dutchman who knows French. Thus the Bible can best be rendered by a native-speaker of the language, who knows Hebrew and Greek, or at least a modern language in which the Bible is already translated. Since this is often not yet possible, we must do the work instead, bearing in mind that it is our task to help the national Christians until they can help themselves, arousing in them the desire to translate for themselves in the form most suited to their needs. Our Bible translation work is therefore only a preliminary step, a sort of demonstration which should pave the way for better work by the nationals themselves. Naturally the Bible can only become their book if it is in their own language; the less it betrays its foreign origin the less will it be regarded as an extraneous addition to the old view of life, and the better will it gain its rightful place in the hearts of the people, whereas it will not be able to hold its own if it is enshrined in mysterious oracular language and stiff foreign expressions, whose meaning can only be explained by an exclusive class of 'scribes'.

Using indigenous expressions

An expression or illustration not current in the receptor language should be replaced by an equivalent, if possible similar expression.

Where this is impossible, the original expression should be translated without explanation.

Thus I have rendered Mt. 6:2, "sound no trumpet before you," by *ne'e da sondo noentoemoe*, literally, 'do not make a lot of talk about it'.

Mt. 6:19, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust consume," is rendered: *Ne'e da sondo ajapamoe ndadika, djamo nakoni noe ane, dja kekajoeboenga*, 'do not save up a lot of cotton goods, which white ants and the damp consume'.

Mt. 6:27, "And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life," is rendered 'who can lengthen his breath (= life) by even one sigh'.

Mt. 7:15, "wolves in sheep's clothing," becomes 'crocodiles in human form'.

Mt. 7:16, "grapes from thorns, figs from thistles," becomes 'bananas from thorn trees, guavas from cane'.

Mt. 13:52, "a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old," becomes 'the head of a family who preserves the inheritance he has received from them of old, and himself increases the family possessions'.

Ex. 20:17, "ox" and "ass" are rendered 'buffaloes' and 'goats'.

Examples of figures which must simply be translated even though they will not immediately be understood are: Mt. 6:3, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"; Mt. 7:3, "the speck (mote) and the beam"; Mt. 6:28, 29 "lilies of the field" as a comparison for the glory of Solomon, is incomprehensible for the Toradja people, however well known the flower which one might use here, for the people have as yet no appreciation for the beauty of flowers. These expressions may gain meaning for the people as they develop, whereas the other terms which have been replaced are never likely to become sufficiently well-known to gain meaning.

It may appear as if I work very freely with the text of Holy Scripture, but the opposite is true. I wish the Toradjas to 'feel' what is being said. Grapes and figs, the two commonest fruits in Palestine, must be replaced by fruits commonly known here, e.g. bananas and guavas (though others might do equally well), since the Toradja reader simply will not know that grapes and figs do not grow on thorns and thistles. Moreover, the force of such a proverbial expression will be lost if it is so translated that it must first be explained before it is understood; that seems to me a wrong principle of translation. Where a deep or complicated idea is stated or a difficult illustration used, the translator may leave much to explanation by teaching, but where the original states something very simple the translation should contain an equally simple rendering.

Lack of suitable words

When a concept must be rendered for which the language has no

adequate expression, it is sometimes possible to borrow a word from a related language in which the Bible has already been translated. One should only resort to circumlocution when a loanword will not be understood.

One of the problems with Indonesian languages is that the terms for abstract 'spiritual' concepts are still tied to the original meaning current in the language. The terms are often not yet free of the common meaning attaching to them in daily life.

For example, I considered using the Toradja word *majoa* 'straight, upright' (used of a road, a tree, etc., but also for 'upright words', 'upright heart' and 'right or upright deeds') as a suitable expression for the Biblical concept 'righteous'. But what does a Toradja understand by this 'uprightness of heart'? I once heard someone tell a story of a Dutchman on board a boat which lay at anchor at Posso (in Celebes), who beckoned to a native sugar-seller in order to buy some sugar. The trader climbed rather awkwardly on board and dropped the sugar in the sea before the Dutchman had bought it. When the Dutchman saw the man's disappointment he gave him some money, so that he suffered no loss after all. When the Toradja audience heard this story, all present exclaimed as one man: "Ah, that Dutchman was *majoa*." I asked, "Who, then, is 'upright of heart'? The answer came, "Whoever is generous." Now the expression for 'generous' is 'white of heart'. Thus an upright or pure heart is a generous heart! This comes from the fact that among the Toradja people there is one cardinal virtue, generosity, and one cardinal sin, stinginess. Generosity and tolerance are typical of everything that is good. Stinginess or unwillingness to give way in a dispute are typical of all that is bad.

Terms for moral attributes are so very weak among the Toradjas that they seldom denote a clearly defined concept. *Madja'a* means 'bad', but it is also used for everything that is inconvenient. For example, if someone who normally does not eat very much suddenly develops a great appetite, so that the cook is afraid there will not be enough rice, then this person is described as eating 'badly' on this occasion! Or again, the word is used of someone who is at the moment angry; but it should not be taken too seriously. All these words are coloured by an easy-going sentiment which often makes them nearly useless for the Bible translator.

This is an instance when help from outside may be sought. The use of a loan-word, which must be severely censured where it is not necessary, can in such a case sometimes provide a solution. ¹

¹ It should be remembered that Dr. Adriani had a concrete situation in mind. It depends entirely on the local situation whether this solution may be adopted elsewhere or not. As the author points out, the use of loan-words where not essential is severely to be censured. With regard to the particular problem discussed here, it is generally safer to rely on teaching in order to enhance the meaning of words used in the translation until they acquire the Biblical content. Ed.

The objection to loan-words is that they are not understood, or, where they exist alongside native words, they are not always acceptable in a good style of speech. Words such as God, angel, Saviour, which bear the character of proper nouns, can sometimes be rendered by an adjective together with an article, e.g. *i Madja'a* 'the Evil (one)' for "Devil" (c.f. Malay *si Djahat*). But words such as holy, righteous, eternity, life hereafter, sin, conversion and repentance are often difficult to render well by indigenous words.

Adoption of loan-words from neighbouring languages which are already used to convey the Christian message has the advantage of securing a certain unity of terminology in the area. But care must be taken to adapt the word to the phonological structure of the receptor language; if this is not done, the people will themselves alter the word, perhaps into a form already familiar to them but with an entirely different meaning! For example, suppose I wish to use the Arabic/Malay word *adil* for 'righteous', then I must alter it to *adili* or *adi*, for East Toradja has no closed syllables. But *adi* already means a magic formula, so that the only form usable would be *adili*. Sometimes a loanword may be unusable for this reason.

Circumlocutions

Circumlocution is only justified when it is possible to render the concept in a concise, clear manner, without weakening its force.

Circumlocution is a sign of literary inability; what has been said in a terse, crisp manner loses its force in circumlocution. In such a case one is faced with the choice of letting the reader *feel* or letting him *understand* the meaning. Circumlocution forces understanding on him. To take an example from daily experience, suppose someone tells a joke but the hearer does not follow it. In order to help him understand it the one who told the joke explains it; by this means the hearer will understand the joke, but will be unable to laugh at it; only when the joke has been retold in its original form will he perhaps be able to laugh. Thus one needs to help the reader *feel* the spirit of the reply of King Jehoash of Samaria to King Amaziah of Jerusalem (2 Kings 14:9): the thistle on Lebanon asks a cedar on Lebanon for his daughter in marriage, imagining himself to be his equal because he also lives on the Lebanon, while that is exactly his misfortune because he is trampled down by a wild beast of *Lebanon*; here one should alter the original as little as possible and ensure that the thrice repeated "on (of) the Lebanon" receives proper emphasis. Thistle and cedar, of course, should be replaced by the names of a despised weed and a noble tree respectively.

A passage such as Mt. 6:7, "when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do," in itself says very little to the Toradja people. "Gentiles" is rendered to *pelamoa*, 'people who serve gods'. We must be consistent in the use of this circumlocution. What then do

these people do when they 'serve gods'? They call upon the names of dead ancestors, as many as they can. Thus it is an obvious solution to render this passage, "When you pray, do not name many empty names as the Gentiles do."

Avoiding interpretation

Interpretation and paraphrase are not legitimate in a genuine Bible translation.

Even apart from the fact that this principle is enshrined in the Bible Society's Rules, it should be obvious that it is right. The truth lying behind this principle is that Bible translation is really the work of the church as a whole and not that of one person. Besides the fact that a translator will never know the language so perfectly that he can do his work without the help of others, it must not bear too much of a personal stamp and there must be no interpretation or paraphrase, if the Bible is to remain the Bible.

We must reconcile ourselves to the fact that the Bible will always remain to some extent obscure for the indigenous Christians. This is nothing strange. However simply you render the Bible, there will always be an element that resists popularisation, and that element is just what is most typical of the Bible. You can render Jn. 1:1 in as garbled a form as you like, but you cannot escape the word "God"! Interpretation should be left to teaching.

Bible stories

A Bible story book should precede the actual Bible translation; preferably it should have numerous pictures in order to promote understanding of the background of the events told, right from the beginning.

Such a book has a double purpose: in the first place the translator is freer, and by amplification and omission he can more clearly help to distinguish between essential and less essential elements, and thus present the Biblical stories in a form suitable for a much larger proportion of the people. Secondly, a Bible story book can increase the desire of the people for an acquaintance with the content of the Bible itself and stimulate the Christians to join in helping towards a real Bible translation; they can help by suggesting improvements and changes, and there is a tremendous amount to be learned from the way in which the people retell the stories to one another. By means of a Bible story book the people will come to long for the Bible itself, and then the real moment for Bible translation has come.²

²The subject of Bible story books was discussed at length in an article by H. van der Veen entitled "Experience with Bible Reading Books", in *TBT* 12.1 (January 1961) pp. 1-13. A few offprints are available on request. Ed.