JOHN BEEKMAN

'LITERALISM' A HINDRANCE TO UNDERSTANDING

The following article is an adaptation of a longer one entitled 'Idiomatic versus Literal Translation', which appeared in Notes on Translation *No.* 18, 11–65 (*Instituto Linguistico de Verano, Mexico*). *Ed.*

1. Types of Translation

The contents of this paper are presented from the standpoint of communicating the Gospel message in translated form to aboriginal peoples and may not necessarily apply to other groups.

Translations tend to cluster around two basic types—literal and idiomatic.[1] Purposefully we have introduced the term *tend* in that we wish to make explicit that a continuum lies between these two opposite poles. As a matter of fact, translations do vary in degree of literalness and idiomaticness; they are scattered at varying points on the continuum between these two opposite poles. Since however, there are characteristics diagnostic of literal translations that differentiate them from idiomatic translations, it is convenient in our discussion to posit two basic types of translation.

A literal translation is characterized by a high transference of the linguistic *form* of the source language into the receptor language.

On the other hand, an idiomatic translation aims at high transference of *meaning* from the source language into the receptor language. Even though the linguistic forms of the receptor language differ widely from the forms of the source language, an idiomatic translation will use the most natural linguistic forms of the receptor language to convey the original meaning.

1.1. *Literal Translations.* A person who translates literally wants to convey the meaning of the source language while making a minimum of adjustments in its grammatical and lexical structure. This desire to retain the linguistic form of the original, which is typical of this approach to translation, results in much wrong, zero, and obscure meaning.

In a literal translation the grammar is usually correct when the constructions are obligatory. However, when the translator is faced with a choice, he invariably chooses to follow the grammatical form found in the original. This may happen to be idiomatic for the receptor language too, but often represents an unnatural literalism.

One of the worst faults of most literal translations is the choice of literal equivalents for the words used in the translation. Inadequate consideration is given to usage and context resulting in ridiculous collocations and nonsensical meanings. Since the meanings of figures of speech, idioms, and

[1] Nida, Eugene A., *Toward a Science of Translating*, pp. 156–92. E. J. Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, 1964.

words whose meanings are special to the Biblical culture cannot be understood correctly in a literal translation, it is amazing that such translations in an aboriginal language communicate anything of the truth.[1] Where the meaning is not skewed or obscure, one can only attribute this to coincidental lexical and grammatical correspondences in the two languages.

Some translators, whose first efforts represent a highly literal translation, soon realize the inadvisability of communicating error and therefore modify their approach. They focus more sharply on the meaning communicated, making lexical adjustments to remove wrong meanings. While such a translation is a definite improvement over more literal types, it however still carries much unnecessary obscurity, ambiguity and zero meaning.

1 John 3: 17 in the King James version illustrates the correction of a potentially wrong meaning arising from a figure of speech. 'But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?' The Greek says 'shuts his bowels from him'. In the King James version, 'of compassion', was added to give the correct meaning to the word 'bowels'. This adjustment retains the literal referent and adds a clue word so that the phrase will be understood correctly.

1.2. *Idiomatic.* In an idiomatic translation, the translator conveys the meaning of the source language in the most natural and forceful form of the receptor language. Thus, instead of attempting to retain in the translation both the linguistic structure *and* the meaning of the source language, the primary focus is properly placed on the meaning of the original and the linguistic structure of the receptor language. The result is the presence of the original message with only coincidental correspondence of linguistic form.

To translate is, as Johnson defined it 'to change into another language, retaining the sense'.[2] Hollander in the book *On Translation* says: . . . 'statements of all kinds have meaning. To translate a sentence from one language to another is somehow to discover its meaning and then to construct a sentence in the new or target language that possesses the same meaning'.[3]

The idea of looking at the linguistic structure of a language as a 'conveyor' or 'vehicle' carrying meaning is appropriate. Suppose we think of a highway as one language and a waterway as another. To carry a passenger by highway one will need a car; to carry the same passenger by water one will use a different vehicle, namely, a boat. It is just this way in carrying meaning. In one language a distinct structure is used from that used in another language even though the messages conveyed are identical. Just as one does not attempt to transfer parts of the car to the boat when changing vehicles, so

[1] The literal approach to the interpretation of Scripture should not be confused with the literal approach to translation discussed in this paper. The first refers to the customarily acknowledged meaning of an expression in its particular context, the second to the transference of linguistic form in the translation process. An idiomatic translation is conducive to the literal method of interpreting Scripture; whereas a literal translation is not, and may lead to the allegorical method of interpretation.

[2] Smith, A. H., quoting Johnson in the Preface, *Aspects of Translation*, p. vii. Secker and Warburg, London, 1959.

[3] Hollander, John, 'Versions, Interpretations and Performances', *On Translation*, p. 207. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1959.

neither does one attempt to transfer the linguistic structure of the original when translating into the receptor language. The language into which a translation is made, is merely a vehicle with which to get the message through to the people. If the meaning does not get through, it is because the translator does not know how to manage the vehicle, he is not well enough acquainted with its structure. Perhaps he is trying to run a boat as though it were a car.

Form is important only as it serves to convey the correct meaning. An idiomatic translation follows this emphasis. Such an orientation to translation has many advantages. It retains the highest faithfulness to the sense of the original, it reduces ambiguity and obscurity to a minimum, it removes zero meanings almost completely, it preserves discourse unity according to the requirements of the receptor language and is stylistically natural.[1] This type of translation is easy to understand. Even the uninformed, uninitiated person who has had little or no contact with Christianity is able to get the gist of any part of the message.

2. Some Linguistic Features Often Transferred in a Literal Translation

There are a number of grammatical and lexical features of the original language which are characteristically transferred into the translation by one who translates literally.

2.1. *Parts of Speech.* One of the characteristic errors of a literal translation is the reproduction of the parts of speech in the receptor language as they occur in the original language. The translator seeks to render a noun for a noun, a verb for a verb, a preposition for a preposition, a pronoun for a pronoun, a proper name for a proper name, etc.

In many languages, a verb can readily be nominalized allowing a translator to match the abstract nouns of the original. Unless the use of nominalized verbs is an active process in the language, this procedure results in unnatural collocations which interfere with the communication of the message. Even when new nominalizations are regularly introduced by the people, their type and frequency will need investigation before they can be safely used in the translation.

1 John 4: 18 begins: 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear.' The two words 'fear' and 'love' are abstract nouns which are not found in many languages except as verbs. Yet, again and again nominalized forms have been constructed to translate these words. It is so much more direct in such cases to render: 'One who loves is not afraid; when we love perfectly we no longer fear.'

L. W. Tancock in his article 'Some Problems of Style in Translation from French' says: 'Often a sentence in French is virtually untranslatable if you

[1] Since style is used in so many senses it may be well to explain what is meant here. The translation with a natural style is the one in which the choice of various optional linguistic features is made in accordance with the patterns found in a large context. Frequency counts are a great help in the study of style. Another aspect of style includes such special features as alliteration, puns, rhetorical parallelisms, and poetic forms found in the receptor language. These may be introduced into the translation at appropriate points since they tend to reinforce meaning and make the message more easily remembered as well as more natural.

insist upon rendering the verb by an English verb, an adjective by an adjective, and so on, but if you remodel the sentence so that the function of the verb is performed by, say, an adverb, the whole thing becomes natural and the exact sense of the original is conveyed without any violence having been done'.[1]

In one aboriginal language there was a single preposition with a limited function. In the translation this single preposition was improperly used as an equivalent for the various Greek prepositions.

In another aboriginal language there was no conjunction 'and'. So a word from the National language for 'and' was borrowed and used wherever *kai* occurs in the Greek, even though the National language was unknown to the aboriginal group. Sometimes translators resort to possible but unnatural affixation in order to match parts of speech. The translator must emancipate himself from this tendency to respect unduly the parts of speech in the original.

2.2. *Grammatical Categories.* Grammatical categories are often retained in a literal translation. The translation renders a passive with a passive, an active with an active, direct discourse with direct, indirect discourse with indirect, a plural wherever a plural is found. When a language offers the possibility of using either the active or passive construction, the literal translator will inevitably follow the form of the original. The translator for the Tojolabal Indians of Mexico avoided this error by noting that in Tojolabal the passive was used almost to the exclusion of the active. Even when the actor or agent is named the passive is used as, for example, Luke 15: 2: 'This man receiveth sinners' is rendered: 'Sinners are received by this man'.

In Sierra Chontal of Mexico and in Navajo of the United States, indirect discourse is rarely used either in conversation or in letters. The translations in these languages follow the natural form of direct address even when this has involved shifting from indirect. Moreover, many words which express inner thoughts or attitudes as well as those which imply speech, such as 'confess', are rendered as direct address.

2.3. *Order.* Another characteristic of literalism is a failure to re-order words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. Following the word order of the original is a common error in literalism. Just as frequent is the failure to make necessary shifts in the order of phrases and sentences. Often the linguistic order confuses the reader until it is changed to correspond to the experiential order.

In Mark 6: 17 the Greek is not in the order in which the events actually occurred, instead there is a flash back. Unless the order is shifted, it can be very confusing to the people for whom the translation is made. Until this verse was re-ordered the Seri Indian helper of Mexico believed that John the Baptist deserved to die because he lived with Philip's wife.

2.4. *Sentence Length.* Often a literal translation makes no adjustment in sentence length. An example occurs in Mark 2: 25, 26. It is one long question in the original which in an idiomatic translation may need to be broken down

[1] Tancock, L. W., 'Some Problems of Style in Translation', *Aspects of Translation*, p. 32. Secker and Warburg, London, 1959.

into one short question as: Have you never read what David did? The remaining clauses are then recast into separate sentences.

2 Thess. 1: 3–10 is one sentence in the Greek. It has been translated with four in the R.S.V.—they are long clumsy sentences still. In Otomi of the Mezquital of Mexico it was translated with ten sentences; in Chuj of Guatemala with twenty-two.

2.5. *Single Words.* Frequently, in literal translations there is an attempt to match a semantically complex word with a single word equally complex. For example, the word 'discipline' carries a number of components of meaning, and may have to be rendered as a phrase or clause. One who translates literally searches for a single word in the receptor language which will match those components. In many cases he can't find one and then leaves a blank space in the translation or introduces an unknown loan word or an inadequate equivalent. This tendency led one translator to use the word 'lost' to translate 'perish, condemn and judgment' because to speak of a judicial decision or verdict required several words. Another translated the word 'apostle' with 'servant', 'will' with 'love', 'peace' with 'happiness', and 'faithful' with 'good', when in each case a more exact equivalent was available in an idiomatic expression or phrase.

2.6. *Concordance.* Another error characteristic of literalism is the choice of lexical items without adequate consideration of context and usage. This often arises from a desire to translate concordantly, i.e. to render a Greek word with the same equivalent in all of its occurrences in, e.g., the New Testament.

Because a translator failed to take into account the contexts in which words are used, he rendered Mark 3: 26 as follows: 'If Satan has risen (in the morning from sleep) and is divided (like an orange is cut in half) he is not able to endure, but is coming to an end.' 1 John 3: 14 'passed (along the trail) from death to life'. Rom. 1: 15 'I'm ready (packed) to preach. . . .' In English 'ready' refers to either physical or mental readiness. In many aboriginal languages 'ready' refers only to physical readiness.

2.7. *Idioms and Figures of Speech.* Usually a literal translation makes no adjustment of idioms or figures of speech. With but few exceptions, the idioms of one language are understood literally in another language. The same is true of most metaphors. Imagine as a foreigner hearing someone say that he dressed a chicken, or that a gun went off. Experience has shown that even though euphemisms, rhetorical questions, metonymies, personifications, litotes, and metaphors are freely used in the receptor language, they may be misunderstood in the translation. This misunderstanding arises (1) when the function or purpose of the figure in the original differs from the function of the corresponding figure in the translation, or (2) when the images employed are unknown or interpreted differently, or (3) when a figure is used only in certain discourse types.

One can readily see the necessity of adjusting the following: John 8: 52 'taste death', Acts 17: 20 'bring strange things to our ears', and Rom. 3: 14 'whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness'. One Indian helper said he knew what it meant to have a mouth full of bitterness since that was the way

his had been that very morning upon arising, but he did not know what 'a mouth full of cursing' might mean.

2.8. *Implicit Form of Implied Information.* Implicit and elliptical information in the original is almost always left implicit or elliptical in a literal translation except when its inclusion is grammatically obligatory. The implicit or elliptical information of the original was easily supplied mentally by the original readers. Students of Scripture can recover the implicit information by studying commentaries, dictionaries, and other source books. However, this is not the case with the new readers of aboriginal groups. This information is lost to them or replaced with a new set of implications. As a result, they cannot help but misinterpret many verses of Scripture.

To the Chinantecos of Mexico, the 'real widows' of 1 Tim. 5: 3 refer to those whose husbands have died. To focus on the meaning intended, the implicit information was supplied as follows: '. . . with nobody to care for them'.

In Eph. 2: 1 the King James version adds the elliptical information 'hath he quickened', borrowing this from verse five.

The clause in Acts 7: 9 'sold Joseph into Egypt' frequently must be rendered 'sold Joseph to people who took him to Egypt'. The elliptical information must be made explicit.

An addition is not legitimate if it is made only to supply incomplete information which while true and useful is not really essential to a proper understanding of the focus of the passage.

2.9. *Generic Form of Information.* Generic information in the original is almost always left generic in a literal translation.

But a generic word or phrase in the translation may refer to a different set of concepts than those to which the same generic word or phrase of the original refers. It is often necessary, therefore, to render a generic statement more specifically. However, the information carried by the more specific rendition should not be more than intended or implied by the original speaker or writer.

In Matt. 5: 23, 24 the word gift occurs three times. It refers to the usual animal sacrifice offered to God but the equivalent word in Cuicateco of Mexico refers to flowers or candles not to animals. This was made more specific by rendering it 'an animal gift' in the first occurrence.

Acts 16: 3 says that Paul circumcised Timothy 'because of the Jews'. This meant to the Sierra Otomi of Mexico that the Jews demanded that this be done and Paul was afraid of their threats on his life. The generic 'because of the Jews' was made more specific as follows: 'in order that the hearts of the Jews wouldn't be disturbed'.

2.10. *Ambiguities.* Ambiguities arising from the original are regularly retained in a literal translation. Moreover, little attention is given to the resolution of new ambiguities introduced by the grammar or lexicon of the receptor language. In contrast, the ambiguities arising from the original and those arising from the receptor language are both removed in an idiomatic translation whenever one of the meanings is not compatible with the focus of the passage. In resolving such ambiguities no information should be introduced that is not already implied or assumed by the original author.

When both meanings are possible in a given passage, there is no need to resolve the ambiguity regardless of whether it originates from the original or from the receptor language. Sometimes the obscure meaning may be the best solution. In most cases, however, it is best that the translator make a choice between the two equally possible interpretations based upon exegetical evidence and his best judgment.

3. Some Reasons Why Many Translate Literally

3.1. *A Wrong Inference from the Doctrine of Inspiration.* As soon as the translator grapples with the task of conveying the Scripture message into another language he is introduced to the distinction between the form and the meaning of Scripture. This distinction is not new or unique in Christian thought. Preus quotes Quenstedt's definition. 'We must distinguish between the grammatical and outer meaning of the divine Word and the spiritual, inner and divine meaning of the divine Word. The former is the "forma" of the Word of God in so far as it is a word, the latter is its "forma" in so far as it is a divine Word.'[1]

Both the form and meaning of Scripture are inspired. The inspiration of the linguistic form gives assurance that the authentic authoritative message is adequately and trustworthily communicated. Preus summarizes this view as explained by the early dogmaticians as follows: 'Content cannot be expressed without words; the very purpose of words is to convey thoughts or content. In the case of something already written, meaning cannot be known except from the words which express the meaning. Consequently, unless we can say that the words of Scripture are given by God, we cannot say that Scripture is inspired, for Scripture consists of words. . . .'[2] Finlayson says: 'Words, in all literature, must be accepted as the vehicles of thought, and the arrangement of words that give adequate expression to the thought is correct to the exclusion of any other arrangement that fails to do this. Only if the thought is verbally correct is the communication what it was intended to be. If the content of revelation is of God, its communication in writing obviously must ensure that it is given as God would have us receive it. In this case, writing communicates the content of revelation, and inspiration guarantees its veracity.'[3]

Since we are completely dependent upon the form to understand the message, it follows that form and meaning stand or fall together. It does not follow, however, that the medium, i.e. form, by which meaning is carried in one language must be the same for another language. If that were true, there could be no acceptable translation of the Scriptures. And such is the view of those who are faithful Muslims. They believe that the Koran is non-translatable because to them form and meaning are inseparable. Those translations which have been done have met with unqualified condemnation.

[1] Preus, Robert, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, pp. 14, 15. Oliver and Boyd, Tweeddale Court, Edinburgh, and 39A Welbeck Street, London, W.1. 1957.

[2] Preus, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

[3] Finlayson, R. A., 'Contemporary Ideas of Inspiration', *Revelation and the Bible*, p. 224. Edited by Carl F. H. Henry. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1958.

The fact that we do attempt to translate Scripture acknowledges that it is translatable. However, to assume that meaning cannot be transferred into another language apart from the original form overlooks (*a*) the differences in languages, (*b*) the subservient role of form to meaning, and (*c*) the fact that the original form did not violate idiomatic usage.

(*a*) Differences in languages. No one will dispute the fact that languages differ. The differences occur in the phonology, grammar and lexicon. This does not mean that there might not be some coincidental similarities even when the languages are from totally different linguistic families. But in spite of these similarities, the differences (except in closely related dialects) are striking both in number and kind. It logically follows, therefore, that the linguistic structure of one language cannot serve to communicate a message to a people whose language structure is quite different.

But some may still feel that at least the lexicon is sufficiently similar so that concordant equivalents can be used throughout the translation. But this is not the case. A single word of the original used in different contexts may have three meanings and require three different words in another language to convey these same meanings. If a word in one context in the source language has the same meaning as an equivalent word in the receptor language, it does not follow that those two words will have identical meanings in all environments. There is no standard system by which the same set of meanings is assigned to words by the different peoples of the world. Each has its own inventory of words with meanings and usages which are both similar and distinct from all others.

In translating Acts 10: 44 where it says 'the Holy Ghost fell on all . . .', one translator insisted on using the concordant equivalent 'fell' in spite of the fact that to do so gave a wrong meaning. The informant understood it to mean, 'The Holy Spirit walking in Heaven tripped and fell down upon the people, but because the Spirit is light in weight no one was injured.' The translator felt in this case, as in others, that since the Holy Spirit originally chose the word 'fell' it should be retained and the correct meaning taught to the people. Such a task, however, is next to impossible since it involves changing the way in which people use and understand their own language.

(*b*) Subservient role of form to meaning. Granted that there can be no meaning without form, yet the purpose of form is to codify an intelligible message. Form is not an end in itself. Otherwise, the message of Scripture could have been given to us in angelic language rather than in Hebrew and Greek. Form is but a means to an end, i.e. to communicate meaning. As such, it is not so important as meaning. E. V. Rieu says: '. . . the meaning, not the idiom of the originals is sacrosanct'.[1] A. R. Hulst in speaking of the relation of form to meaning says: 'Instead of separating the content of the Hebrew sentence from its form and transferring this into a Dutch mould, both the form and the content of the source language are sometimes rendered into words of the receptor language without the full recognition of the fact that the original Hebrew form frequently does not coincide with the form required in Dutch. As a result the "translation" is disfigured by numerous Hebraisms. Of course,

[1] Rieu, E. V., *Introduction to the Four Gospels*, p. xi. Penguin Books, Baltimore, Maryland, 1952.

one can contend that he has made as literal a translation as possible and can insist that the unity of form and content may not be destroyed but the result is not a translation in the true sense of the word'.[1]

(*c*) The original form did not violate idiomatic usage. The original authors under inspiration of the Spirit wrote in a form which was common to their day. They used words in accordance with the whole linguistic structure of the language. The original is idiomatic. Warfield expresses it as follows: 'And the Holy Ghost in using human speech, used it as He found it. It cannot be argued then that the Holy Spirit could not speak of the sun setting, or call the Roman world 'the whole world'. The current sense of a phrase is alone to be considered, and if men so spoke and were understood correctly in so speaking, the Holy Ghost, speaking their speech would also so speak.'[2] The study of Aramaic and of papyri findings written in Koine Greek are of value to New Testament scholars because the language of the New Testament represents the usage of that period. There can be no other conclusion except that since the Holy Spirit chose to honour and employ the then current and natural usage of the language, we should do likewise and use the form which is current and natural to the people.

Placing emphasis on the demands of the receptor language in order to convey the correct meaning of the original does not mean that the form of the original will be completely absent from the translation. It does mean, however, that correspondence of form is never an end desired for itself, i.e. never introduced just to keep the form of each as much alike as possible. Form is always selected in order to faithfully convey the message of the original.

The meaning of an idiomatic version should be the same as that of the original. Even though there is inevitable gain or loss of information in the translation process, for all practical purposes we may speak of the meaning or message communicated by the version as the same as that of the original. The comparison of meaning is the true measure to determine the fidelity of the version to the original.

3.2. *A Misconception of the Doctrine of Illumination.* Another reason why some continue to translate literally is due to a misconception of the doctrine of illumination which demands undue dependence upon the Holy Spirit to communicate the message.

Experience has shown again and again that neither believers nor unbelievers can understand passages which are distorted by literalism. On the other hand, both can understand passages which are translated idiomatically.

Even though both the nonregenerate man and the believer can read and understand what the Scriptures say, the divine message cannot be grasped as the truth of God nor can that truth be appropriated by the individual without the operation of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures are explicit about this point. 'The verb . . . *phōtizō* (to illuminate) . . . is used of a general enlightening which Christ brings to all men especially through the Gospel (1 John 1: 9;

[1] Hulst, A. R., 'Bible Translating into Dutch', *Babel*, Vol. IX, No. 1–2, p. 79. Langenscheidt KC., Berlin-Schöneberg. 1963.

[2] Warfield, B. B., *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Appendix, p. 438. The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1948.

2 Tim. 1: 10). It also describes the enlightening experience of conversion (Heb. 6: 4), the understanding of Christian truth (Eph. 1: 18; 3: 9), and the searching character of future judgment (1 Cor. 4: 5).'[1]

Since Scripture is sufficiently clear and straightforward in the original, any translation that cannot be comprehended intellectually because the meaning is obscured or distorted by the manner in which it has been rendered does injustice to the original form in which the message was given. To depend upon the Spirit to illuminate a poor translation presumes on His ministry since nothing in Scripture or experience suggests that this is part of the Spirit's ministry of illumination.

3.3. *Undue Dependence on Teaching.* Some translate literally because of undue dependence upon teaching. Admittedly, teaching is necessary inasmuch as the message of Scripture is God's revelation of truths which man could never have discovered for himself. His revelation contains many concepts, such as the imputation of righteousness, which will need to be taught. It is expected, therefore, that the understanding of concepts which are difficult because of the very nature of the message will be dependent upon teaching even in an idiomatic translation. Also, in the process of translation, sometimes approximate equivalents are the best available. Here too, it is legitimate that the fuller understanding of these terms depend upon teaching and the fuller context of Scripture. On the other hand, it is not legitimate to depend on teaching the translation when certain features of the grammatical or lexical structure of the original have been carried over causing wrong meanings and heavy obscurities. It is the careless translator who again and again hides behind a literal rendition saying: 'I know this might be misunderstood, but we can teach it.'

3.4. *Hesitancy to Depart from Existing Versions.* Some translate literally because of a hesitancy to depart from existing versions. For example, one translator said: 'Why should I translate the word "flesh" in any other way since every version I have looked at translates it "flesh"?' The reason he should is that the word 'flesh' in this language as well as in many others means 'a piece of meat'—nothing more. The word 'flesh' is seldom found to have a metaphorical extension indicating a disposition toward sin. Thus, a substitute for it is preferable to a literal equivalent even though major versions use 'flesh'.

Moreover, major versions are limited in the kinds of adjustments made because the translation is intended to serve people from various backgrounds. Since a translation for an aboriginal group is intended to serve one ethnic group with an essentially unified culture, what is done in major versions cannot be considered a standard for what may or should be done for aboriginal groups. Even the Popular Version in Spanish does not make all the types of adjustments which one who works with a single ethnic group often makes. In preparing a translation for all the different peoples who speak Spanish it was necessary to keep the total reading public in mind. Therefore, in the major versions which serve people with diversified backgrounds much that is implicit or potentially obscure or wrong for some

[1] Ryrie, Charles C., 'Illumination', *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, p. 277. Everett F. Harrison (editor-in-chief), Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

minorities, must be left that way and the correction of these misconceptions must be carried by the teaching ministry of the church. This is as it should be since in an urban society there is less illiteracy and the people have access through books to a knowledge of literature with its rhetorical devices, and to Judaism and Palestinean culture.

In a primitive or peasant society, however, the translation is made for a people who are just emerging from illiteracy, and who have no knowledge of literature in general, or of Judaism or Palestinean culture in particular. The society represents a cultural group with essentially the same beliefs and value system. Since the translation is to serve such a group, the translator should take into consideration the belief system of the people and make the necessary adjustments in the translation to correct wrong or undesirable meanings, even though this involves departing from the form of major versions.

3.5. *Bilingualism.* Other translators say that bilingualism is coming in and people are going to compare their translation with the version in the National language. That should not keep us from making a good idiomatic translation.

Aboriginal societies live in various degrees of isolation from civilization. Their contact with the National language is primarily on a commercial and judicial basis with little or no social broadening in spite of years of such contact. The school may or may not have a wider influence. The language of business tends to be cold, bargaining and without soul; the language of civil authorities tends to be legal, threatening and penal. Thus, a rudimentary command of the commercial and judicial areas of language is totally ineffective for deep interpersonal communication. Bilingualism on this level does not remove the necessity of using the language of the home, the language of the heart, the language which has in its vocabulary the concepts central to the salvation message. The Word of God in the vernacular is just as necessary where bilingualism has just come in as it is in a purely monolingual situation. Religious terms in the National language will be the last to carry real meaning to the speaker of an aboriginal language.

New 'bilinguals' understand the meaning of words in the National language in terms of their own language. Unknown words are guessed at. Some 'bilingual' Otomi Christians of Mexico illustrate the wrong meanings often communicated by the National language. They were memorizing John 15: 1: 'Yo soy la vid verdadera, y mi Padre es el labrador.' They did not recognize the words 'la vid' *the vine*, and 'labrador' *the farmer*, so they substituted words which were familiar to them and phonetically similar. The verse came out this way: 'Yo soy David verdadera, y mi Padre es el hablador.' *I am David and my father is the one who talks.*

If we keep our eyes on the primary goal, i.e. to communicate the Gospel message, bilingualism is not going to enter in as a factor retarding us from producing an idiomatic translation.

3.6. *Fear to Accept the Responsibility of Exegesis.* Another reason why people translate literally is because they are afraid to accept the responsibility of exegesis. As soon as one translates idiomatically, the problems of exegesis increase. One must regularly consult the commentaries, the lexicons, and grammars in order to translate idiomatically. One doesn't really have to

know what a passage means if he translates literally. Those who are afraid to take responsibility for the exegesis of a passage hide behind a literal translation. Of course one may make some mistakes when he translates idiomatically, and perhaps he may even convey some few ideas which are wrong. But, remember, if one translates literally, the number of wrong ideas conveyed will be many more and of a more serious type. Let each translator recognize and accept his responsibility for exegesis.

3.7. *Deficient Control of the Lexicon.* This is another reason why people translate literally. Some translators by inclination prefer to sit at a desk analysing the language or reading commentaries and thus spend little or no time at all with the people. With good control of the grammar but poor compositional and conversational ability such translators resort to the use of the National language and their own dictionary file. Words are used in the translation which are not in the active vocabulary of the translator nor has he investigated the full range of contexts in which they may be used. The informant's suggested equivalents of the National language words are uncritically accepted. The importance of learning to speak and use the language in the first few years of the translator's field time cannot be over-emphasized.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, let us keep in mind that a translation should be as rich in vocabulary, as idiomatic in phrase, as correct in construction, as smooth in flow of thought, as vigorous in meaning, and as elegant in style as it might be were it not a translation at all, and at the same time, faithfully convey the meaning of the original.

The **Index to the Arndt and Gingrich Greek Lexicon**, by John R. Alsop, reviewed in *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 96–100, may be ordered from:

The Summer Institute of Linguistics,
Apartado 22067,
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