

PARALLELS IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: A CASE STUDY

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In 1976 the current language translation of the NT in Italian was first published. Its name is *Parola del Signore* ("Word of the Lord"): in this article we shall refer to it by the initials PdS. Soon afterwards, during the years 1977 and 1978, we asked widely for criticisms of it, and we carefully collected them. In this way, it was planned to carry on a revision of the NT and to finish, at the same time, the new translation of the OT. Both projects were to be combined in an edition of the entire Bible in current language. (It is now almost ready; the book will be distributed in the first half of 1985.)

An important meeting was held in 1979 in order to go through the various criticisms. We wanted to evaluate their quality and their strength. The working group found that many of them were only emotional reactions. They reflected widespread and unscientific ideas. For instance, according to some readers old translations following the principle of formal-literal equivalence are always better and more faithful, than others like PdS. Such criticisms were often not worthy of any serious consideration because of their linguistic weakness. But other criticisms turned out to be much more relevant. The working team discussed them one by one and in several cases decided that some changes to the previous text were possible or even necessary. Now, after some years of work, we can say that the Italian NT revision has become a fairly deep one.

In this article I want to examine one aspect that seems particularly important from the point of view of the theory and practice of biblical translation. Indeed, while all that happened during our work may be of interest to other translators, this is a point that is particularly important to all of them: how to deal with the synoptic texts in a common language translation.

A fair number of the criticisms we collected were in the same direction. They pointed out that in PdS the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) seemed to be not as "synoptic" as in other translations. Different readers drew our attention to different examples of the same thing: PdS was almost useless for understanding or showing the coincidences, similarities, and differences, which are frequent and important features in the synoptic texts of the NT. In other words, quite a lot of readers accused the PdS translators of having neglected or undervalued such features, which are a real part of the meaning of the first three Gospels.

Criticisms of this kind were the strongest and the most serious we received. Therefore we decided that it was desirable to consider their importance in a careful review of the principles which had been used during the previous work. Reconsidering our texts, we discovered that the "synoptic" features, the coincidences, similarities, and differences, in the passages had mostly been considered and dealt with as "formal" features. There were several consequences of this.

The most frequent case is where two or three sentences of the Gospels show close parallels, and the PdS translator thought it was possible to translate them in two or three different ways. He saw in such a situation an exceptionally good opportunity to apply a general principle which is often expressed in modern theories about translation. Every text—it is said—can be faithfully translated by different forms, because each of them can reflect some aspects of the original meaning. A translator usually has to make a choice between several possibilities. He decides to write down only one translation, faithful to the text and suited to the understanding of his readers; therefore, he must discard all the other possibilities. But if he is translating two or three parallel texts (as in the synoptic Gospels) he may see a rare opportunity: in this case it is possible to choose two or three different translations for the same sentence, all faithful and complementary to each other. One of these translations can reproduce the original meaning in a natural way for the second language, neglecting some formal features; while another translation can be closer to the formal features of the original text, with perhaps not such an easy understanding of the meaning. Every translation, though good, is always and necessarily limited: it cannot reflect *all* the features of the original. So our strong desire to provide more than one translation for a single text becomes a real possibility in translating synoptic texts. But obviously, in doing this the reader can be deprived of a piece of information: that is, the texts are copies of the same form.

The opposite case also occurs. If we are translating two or three parallel texts that are very similar to each other, it can happen that in the second language they look more similar than in the first language, or even become identical. PdS mostly considered slight differences as “formal” features not affecting the meaning. Sometimes this is true and therefore the translations can be quite faithful. But they obviously neglected the formal synoptic relationship. From this point of view also the reader is deprived of a piece of information.

Between these two extremes we found other examples. Two parallel passages in the Gospels have similar (but not identical) words, but in the translated text they seem more different or more similar to each other than they are in the Greek original. That is not always the consequence of bad or unfaithful translating: often it is only the result of work in which we decided to concentrate mainly on the meaning, and thus neglected many formal features.

During the discussion of the criticisms of PdS we came to realize that the translation of the synoptic Gospels demands special attention, both theoretical and practical. We discovered special difficulties in other Bibles of all types, in Italian and other languages ancient and modern. It is right that a common language translation should give priority to the meaning over the formal features of the original text while literal translations usually go in the opposite direction. But we realized that even a common language translation cannot simply neglect *every* formal feature! If these features are more or less closely related to the meaning (that meaning the translator wants to give to his reader) then it is important for us to carry them into the second language text. While

translating the Italian NT we didn't intend to prepare a synopsis of the Gospels; therefore people could not expect that our translation would be the best means of understanding all the synoptic aspects of the synoptic Gospels. But even in this case we had to be particularly conscious of one fact: the average reader of a common language translation has the right to find in it the ways to understand both the real meaning of every Gospel passage and the relationships that connect parallel passages, when they exist.

In the light of our study we decided it was necessary to take notice of the criticisms of PdS in this area. Taking into account the sort of translation we were doing (a current language one, not a synopsis) we realized that several improvements were possible and desirable. Generally speaking, every common language translation of the Synoptics should adopt the following two principles:

- (a) All major coincidences, differences and similarities should be reflected in the second language text. Through it, the reader should be able to understand the main formal features of the synoptic relationship that exist among the Greek Gospels.
- (b) Other coincidences, differences and similarities are smaller and less important (in general they don't concern whole sentences but only single words). Some of them can't really be reflected in any good translation of the meaning. The reason for this is a linguistic one; two languages are *always* different from each other because they organize areas of meaning in different ways. Therefore a good translation can *never* be used as a perfect synopsis! Some pieces of information will be lost anyway. If a translation must be faithful to the meaning, it can reflect only *some* synoptic aspects.

It is true that PdS neglected some formal features that we can find in other translations; but this is the logical consequence of being a "common language" translation. In PdS the original meaning is reflected in a form which is "natural" to the second language, resulting in the loss of some bits of information about the formal aspects of the original Greek texts. Because of this it is clear that the original PdS was less useful than other translations as a means of discovering coincidences and differences of the original synoptic Gospels.

Some examples taken from our revision work can illustrate the kind of analysis we made and the kinds of changes we decided to make in the previous translation.

- (1) Mk 1.3 contains an OT quotation (from Is 40.3) that occurs in the same form also in the parallel texts of Matthew and Luke.

But PdS translated it in three different ways:

Mk 1.3: *È' la voce di uno che grida nel deserto: preparate la via per il Signore, spianate i suoi sentieri!*

Mt 3.3: *Una voce grida nel deserto: preparate la via per il Signore, spianate i suoi sentieri!*

Lk 3.4: *Ecco, una voce risuona nel deserto: Preparate la strada al Signore che viene! spianate le vie per il suo passaggio.*

During the revision we thought that each of those translations was good; but they failed to provide an important piece of information (the

coincidence of the three texts in the Greek original). Such a piece of information can be given to the reader without any damage to the meaning and to the common language character of the translation. Therefore we decided to translate them all in the same way.

- (2) When Jesus was baptized by John he saw heaven opening. PdS used the verb *aprirsi* ("to open") in Mk 1.10 and in the parallel texts of Matthew and Luke. But the original Greek of Mark is different both from Luke and Matthew. During the revision we concluded that a small difference of that kind, typical of the Markan language, could be easily reflected in PdS. Therefore we changed from *vide il cielo aprirsi* ("he saw heaven opening") to *vide il cielo spalancarsi* ("he saw heaven torn open").
- (3) In Mk 1.16 it is said that Jesus was walking along the shore of the Galilean Sea. Matthew's parallel text in Greek uses a slightly different verb indicating more or less "to walk". In PdS the two verbs happened to be identical! During the revision work we realized that in this case our translation couldn't easily follow the difference in the original Greek text. Therefore we decided to leave PdS as it was.
- (4) In Mk 1.21 and parallels Jesus went into the Capernaum synagogue; then the evangelists relate how the people reacted. The three texts are fairly similar in the original; but in PdS Mark and Matthew alone were almost identical, while Luke seemed very different. During the revision we decided to introduce several small changes in order to make evident to the reader that the three texts are identical in relation to the principal words and different only in minor aspects of expression.
- (5) In a few cases the passage headings were discussed. For instance Mk 1.29–31 is parallel both to Matthew and Luke. In PdS the three translations were similar, indeed. But their titles were different, too different (so that Peter's mother-in-law was mentioned only before Matthew's text). Such a difference was not necessary and could give a wrong piece of information to the reader. Therefore during the revision we chose Matthew's title and we used it in the other Gospels also.
- (6) The same kind of modification was applied to Mk 2.1–12 and the synoptic passages of Matthew and Luke. We found that PdS was not really justified: while both Matthew and Luke had the same heading *Gesù guarisce un uomo paralitico*, ("Jesus heals a paralyzed man") Mark underlined a quite different aspect of the passage *Gesù e il potere di perdonare i peccati*, ("Jesus and the authority to forgive sins"). During the revision we decided that both the aspects were important in the original Greek; it was possible and desirable to connect them in one title that could be repeated three times: *Gesù guarisce e può perdonare i peccati* ("Jesus heals and has authority to forgive sins").
- (7) In Mk 2.17 and parallels we read a whole sentence that is identical in the Greek texts. But PdS translated it by three different forms! All of them are faithful because interpreters indicate that various meanings are possible. But because of this the modern reader couldn't guess that the originals are identical. Therefore during the revision we decided to adopt only one translation, the same for every Gospel, and to put other possible

- meanings in a footnote. (In 1976 PdS was published without any notes, as it had been decided before; but now the entire Bible will have some of them, as in many other modern translations.)
- (8) The main image of Mk 4.24 and parallels is the same *la misura*, (“the measure”) while the whole sentences are similar and the wider contexts are slightly different. PdS used three translations that seemed too different from each other, more than was necessary. Therefore we modified them, but we made uniform only the main image, leaving the rest of each sentence more or less as it was. From this the reader can understand that the three contexts are not perfectly parallel and the meaning of the image itself changes slightly in each Gospel.
 - (9) During the narrative of Jesus’ arrest, Mark and Matthew use two similar but different words to indicate the “signal” Judas had given the enemies. In PdS the differences between the two phrases happened to be greater than in the original Greek text. They were similar to each other in meaning, but the reader couldn’t see that two very similar words were behind them. We had in Mk 14.44: *Il traditore si era messo d’accordo sul segnale da usare e aveva detto . . .* (“the traitor had agreed that he would use a signal and had said”). In Matthew 26.48 the text read: *Il traditore s’era messo d’accordo con loro e avevo detto . . .* (“the traitor had agreed with them and had said”). During the revision we decided that the presence of the similarities could and should become more evident here. Therefore we fixed two similar phrases where it was easy to see that the two central words were slightly different *segno/segnale*, (“sign/signal”). Mark: *Il traditore si era messo d’accordo con loro. Aveva stabilito un segno e aveva detto* (“the traitor had agreed with them. He had devised a sign and had said”). Matthew: *Il traditore si era messo d’accordo con loro. Aveva stabilito un segnale e aveva detto*.
 - (10) We know the content of John the Baptist’s preaching mostly from Matthew and Luke. Their phrases are often identical or almost identical in Greek. But this fact was not always evident in the PdS text. For instance, Mt 3.12 was too different from Lk 3.17 (*e brucerà invece la paglia con un fuoco senza fine; ma la paglia la brucerà con un fuoco che non si spegne mai*). During the revision we decided that identities of that kind should be reflected in the Italian translation. As a consequence, the same form was chosen for both texts (*ma la paglia la brucerà con un fuoco senza fine*).
 - (11) In the story of Jesus’ temptations the “pinnacle” of the temple is given the same name by both Matthew and Luke. In PdS, on the contrary, we found that the name was translated by two expressions slightly different: *il punto più alto del tempio* (Matthew); *la parte più alta del tempio* (Luke). During the revision we decided that such a difference in PdS was unjustified, because it was not necessary either to the current language or to the clarity of the meaning. Therefore the difference was eliminated.
 - (12) In other cases we met again the problem of the headings. We had to admit that in several passages PdS headings didn’t help the reader to understand the synoptic situation. In general, they were good, but unfortunately

they happened to be too different for passages which were closely parallel. During the revision we established a better principle: if two or three passages are identical or very similar in Greek the Italian headings must show an identical or very similar form. So for instance we decided to use the same title for the narrative of the call of the first disciples in every Gospel, whereas PdS used three different phrases (see Mk 4.18 and parallels).

- (13) Sometimes we find in the Greek original two parallel texts that are identical, but their contexts are different. In those cases it can be necessary to use two different translations since a current language translation must give priority to the meaning. In Mk 9.28 and Mt 17.19 the wording is identical: *perché non siamo stati capaci di scacciarlo?* (“why couldn’t we drive him/it out?”) But the explicit meaning of the object *lo* (“him/it”) is different in Mark and Matthew. As it was written in PdS, the first means *quello spirito* (“that spirit”) while the second one means *quel demonio* (“that demon”). Therefore we decided to leave PdS as it was. In that instance it became clearer how PdS could not be used as a synopsis to understand every feature of the Greek original.
- (14) Quoting the most important commandment of the Jewish Law, the three Gospels are very similar to each other in the Greek original.

Mk 12.30: *Tu devi amare il Signore tuo Dio . . .*

Mt 22.37: *Ama il Signore, il tuo Dio, . . .*

Lk 10.27: *Ama il Signore Dio tuo . . .*

During the revision we removed the differences: in this way the reader of the translation will be able to understand that the Greek sentences are identical or almost identical. The same kind of modification was applied to other texts (for instance Mt 23.37–39 and Lk 13.34–35) the sentences of which are almost identical in Greek, while that feature was not evident to the reader of PdS. We often changed them in order to have Italian texts which are very similar or even identical.

- (15) The fairly long discourse of Jesus against the Pharisees is reported by Matthew and Luke; it has several coincidences and several differences. During the revision we realized that PdS should be changed so that the Italian translation could reflect the synoptic relationships in a better way. Some words became more similar to each other, some were left as they were before, some of them became more different. Two examples: (a) Mt 23.25 and Lk 11.39 are parallel texts that in PdS were too different (in Matthew *voi purificate l'esterno*; in Luke *vi preoccupate di pulire la parte esterna*); only one, the second one, was chosen for both sentences. (b) We saw that PdS used the same word *tombe* (“tombs”) in Mt 23.27 and Lk 11.47; following the Greek text more closely, we distinguished between *tombe* in Matthew and *sepolcri* (“sepulchres”) in Luke.
- (16) In some cases PdS seemed to reflect faithfully a slight difference in the Greek originals (for instance Mt 3.12 *per pulire*; Lk 3.17 *per separare*). But in that example the Greek difference is very slight (they are two tenses of the same verb) and from a common language point of view Luke was

much clearer. So we decided that it was desirable to use the same form *per separare il grano dalla paglia*.

- (17) The passage in which Jesus speaks about the most important commandment are similar in the first three Gospels. But only Luke adds to that episode the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the PdS headings this difference was not at all evident (the reader couldn't see at first glance that the discussion about the first commandment is present also in Luke; in fact, the heading of Lk 10.25–37 spoke only of a parable). During the revision we chose a different title, partly the same as those of Matthew and Mark (*Il comandamento più importante*) and partly typical of Luke (*la parabola del buon samaritano*).
- (18) The words of Jesus about the scandals (Mt 18.6 and parallels) are similar but slightly different in the Greek original. PdS had translated them in exactly the same way *sarebbe meglio*, (“it would be better”). During the revision we were able to introduce a slight difference, easy to understand (Matthew: *sarebbe più conveniente*, “it would be more convenient”).

This article was already finished when I received TBT of October 1983 and read P. Ellingworth's article: “Translating parallel passages in the Gospels” (pages 401–407). He does not refer to any particular translation, and he gives more general examples; but his principles and my own experience are on the whole the same. I would like to repeat some of his statements.

- A common language translation is “a translation which aims above all to reproduce the meaning . . .” (page 401).
- “the same meaning can be expressed in different ways” (page 401).
- “where parallels have strictly the same meaning, the translator is free to translate them in the same way” even if the originals are different (page 406).
- “where differences between the synoptics, however slight, involve a difference of meaning, that difference must be respected in translation”(page 406).
- “the translator should not make the Gospels sound more alike than they are” (page 406).

I fully agree with those statements. I would only dare to add that it is not always very easy to decide whether a difference of form involves a difference of meaning. For this reason I would suggest the following principles:

- (a) every major difference and coincidence, involving form and/or meaning, must and can be reflected in a common language translation;
- (b) in any case, a common language translation must give priority to the meaning, even at the expense of some formal correspondences;
- (c) some synoptic features cannot be respected because of the different structures of languages (whichever two languages we may have in mind);
- (d) if the translator feels that a fairly important synoptic feature has to be neglected for the sake of meaning, he can put in a footnote another possible translation, more formal than the one adopted for the text.