

“Here I am to do your will, O God, just . . .”

Or in Psalm 69.16:

“Answer me, LORD, in the goodness of your constant love . . .”

Again, however, in many African languages the vocative expression (or the person who is addressed) has to come before the prayer or the imperative phrase (the address). It may not come at the end, and even less in the middle of it. Restructuring is required in all these cases.

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Digressions introduced by “for . . .”

During a recent checking session in Sierra Leone, I several times questioned a translator about the use of a word meaning “because” to render “for” in his translation of Matthew. “For” can have the same meaning as “because” in English, but my own knowledge of a related language led me to suspect that the word for “because” in his language could not be used to render “for” in many contexts. My suspicions were confirmed through our discussions. Therefore, we looked carefully at each occurrence of “for” in Matthew’s Gospel. This procedure that we followed resulted in a better translation than would have resulted had we not looked at “for” carefully.

But I was not happy for two reasons. For one thing, I had not been able to explain to the translator clearly enough how to determine on his own whether or not he could translate “for” with his word for “because”. And for another thing, I still suspected that although there were passages where “for” could be replaced by a word meaning “because” with no gross distortion of meaning, somehow “for” was often used to indicate something different than “because”. Fortunately, before the end of the checking session I was able to understand the problem more clearly and could propose a solution to the translator. I would like to share that solution with other translators by means of this note.

Basically, the distinction between the use of “because” and of “for” is that with “because” the author is presenting information as cause or reason for something else, but with “for” the author is presenting information as a digression from the regular stream of what he is writing. Digressions were brought to my attention by an article by Ernst Wendland in *Notes on Translation* number 94 (1983). There Wendland uses the term “digression” to identify what is happening in a wide variety of situations in the Bible, including clauses which are introduced by the word “for”. Wendland calls these digressions because they “digress” or “temporarily depart from the main topic under discussion.” The use of “for” is only one of the different ways that Wendland notes digressions may be signalled.

Wendland recognizes ten classes of digressions. But here I want to present and discuss several “for” digressions found in Matthew. I would especially like to point out the different meanings that are conveyed when a word which means “because” is substituted for “for”. (In all of the following examples “for” is the equivalent used for the Greek conjunction *gar*.)

Matthew 8.8–9: But the centurion answered him, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me . . .” (RSV)

A possible direct cause and effect relationship following “will be healed” is: my servant will be healed because you have power to heal from afar. However, if “because” is used to replace “for”, the cause of the healing becomes the centurion’s being under authority. Does he mean to indicate that Jesus will not heal servants of people who are not under authority? No. The centurion talks about “authority” in order to “explain” how he can understand Jesus’ authority to heal. This is an example of what Wendland calls explanatory digression.

Matthew 23.5: They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad . . . (RSV).

A possible direct cause and effect relationship is: they do their deeds to be seen by men because they want people to praise them. However, if “because” is used in place of “for” the cause of their actions (or of their actions being seen) is that they have broad phylacteries and so on. Does Jesus mean to say that having broad phylacteries enables one’s deeds to be seen by others? No. Jesus is naming broad phylacteries and the other things as examples of deeds that the Pharisees do to be seen by men. This is another example of explanatory digression.

Matthew 26.10–11: But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” (RSV)

A possible direct cause and effect relationship is somehow difficult to determine in the case of the first “for”. But if the question is turned into a statement, then it is easier to deal with the “for”. We can understand Jesus’ question as meaning: “Do not trouble the woman.” At this point we can see that the clause “for she has done a beautiful thing” can be considered the direct cause of Jesus’ command. However, we should note that “for she has done a beautiful thing” is Jesus’ evaluation of what the woman has done and is not the cause of Jesus’ command. This is an example of an “evaluative” digression.

The next “for” in this passage introduces a general statement: you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. If “because” is used here, the reading will be that having the poor with you makes what she did a beautiful thing. However, verse 12 shows us what makes her action a beautiful thing—she has prepared Jesus’ body for burial. The general statement about the poor is actually an explanatory digression.

Matthew 26.31: Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” (RSV) The rest of the passage (especially Peter’s denial) makes it clear that the reason the disciples fall away is that they are afraid. But if “for” is replaced by “because” the text will read that the disciples fall away because they wanted to fulfill Scripture. That is not what Jesus means to say. He is making a “prophetic” digression.

If translators can recognize that “for” often signals a digression, and they translate digressions as digressions, they will more faithfully reproduce the meaning of the text in their own languages.

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