

TRANSLATING FOR PARAGRAPH COHESION

Dr David Cranmer has been until recently a UBS Translations Consultant based in West Africa

In this article I want to discuss the value of translating by paragraphs. The reason for translating in this way is to reduce the “strangeness” in the translation. Texts which are translated sentence by sentence, or by smaller units, have greater “strangeness” to them than those translated by the paragraph or by larger units of text. One of the goals of a translation should be to produce a text that is as natural as possible, and that certainly does not exceed the tolerance that speakers have for “strangeness” in their language.

Strangeness can come from various sources. For example, I was testing a translation of the book of Ruth and discovered that the translation was not well understood. But when the Biblical names were replaced by names that were familiar to the people, the text became clear. Apparently, the language of the translation was somewhat strange, and the combination of strange language and strange names made the translation exceed the tolerance that people had for strangeness in their language. Since in real Bible translation we cannot replace strange Biblical names by familiar names, we must work to reduce the strangeness in the language of the translation.

One way to reduce strangeness in a translation is to express fully in words information that is implicit or “hidden” within the text. Translation consultants have pointed out for a long time that bringing this information into the text in words lets people listen to a translation without having to work hard to make sense of it. Some different types of implicit information are historical, geographical and cultural information. We refer to these as types of background information. These are things which the people who first heard the Bible already understood and did not need to have explained, or referred to in detail.

What I have only recently come to understand is that implicit information is connected with paragraph cohesion. Cohesion is the term that is used to talk about what “holds a paragraph together” so that it makes sense and flows smoothly. If there is not enough cohesion, then the language sounds strange, and there is no unity and smoothness to the paragraph. One type of implicit information that is cohesive has to do with “frames”. The idea of “frames” was brought to my attention by Robert Longacre. An example of a “frame” is the concept of “taxi”. When we make reference to a taxi, the frame “taxi” includes the concept of “driver”. In talking about a taxi we do not have to state in words that a taxi comes with a driver. It is assumed that a taxi has a driver. Thus, when we mention “taxi”, “driver” is implicit information that is associated with taxi. In other words, “driver” is part of the frame “taxi”.

If we study our Biblical text in terms of frames, we may find that there are frames that include more implicit information than we find when we look only for background information such as facts of history, geography, and culture. For each frame in the Bible, we need to determine if it can be treated as a frame in the language of translation or not. If it cannot, then we need to make reference in words to the implicit information of the frame.

Another way of looking at implicit information is in terms of predictable scripts. Longacre illustrates this idea with a common North American event—eating at a “fast foods” establishment. Longacre uses the following text:

“I went into Wendy’s and ordered a hamburger. After eating it, I got up and walked to the car.”

Note that “eating” is given as background information. The reason for this is that the script of what occurs at Wendy’s includes as its main event “eating”. If a person goes into Wendy’s and orders something to eat (such as a hamburger), then it is assumed that the person will pay for the food, receive it, go to a table or counter, eat it and leave. In Longacre’s example, both the eating and sitting down to eat are referred to by noting the ending of these actions. The actions themselves were assumed as part of the predictable script. The payment for the food and receipt of it are assumed entirely. The reason that the text can be understood even though several events were not mentioned, is that people living in North America can predict these events once the script of fast foods establishment has been introduced.

But speakers of English in other regions may not share the knowledge about fast foods establishments, and thus they do not have a script which predicts what usually happens at those places. So they may have trouble understanding the text. Similarly with the Bible, it may be that we can reduce strangeness in translation by looking for events which are not mentioned because the text was a predictable script for the original hearers or readers, and then determining in each case if the script is shared by speakers of the modern language.

Scripts can even include things such as the arrangement of information in a text. For example, logical statements are frequently made in the Western world in certain formal ways. However, these ways of expressing logic are not used among many ethnic groups of the Third World. Similarly, the structure known as “chiasm” that is frequent in the Bible makes it difficult for Western speakers to understand how to connect different parts of a Biblical text together properly. (Chiasm means a series of statements or references, followed by another series of related or similar statements given in the reverse order.) Chiasm provided structure in Biblical Hebrew, but it distorts structure in, for example, English. And a particular form of logical statement gives structure in English but distorts structure in, for example, many languages of West Africa. Thus, we can reduce strangeness in our Bible translations by comparing scripts in the Bible with those in the languages of translation. Scripts and frames are examples of devices that are used to give cohesion to a text.

At a workshop in March 1983 I was able to make a first attempt at trying to get a better usage of these cohesive devices in Bible translation. The text chosen was Mark 6.17–29. This text is often used at workshops because of the problems in translation “flashback”, and because of this the story was very familiar to the people attending the workshop. Because of its familiarity I asked one of the participants to write out the story in his own language from memory—without going back to consult either an English version or his

previous translation. The following is a fairly literal back-translation of what he produced. It is followed by the RSV text.

Workshop text

It is said, King Herod took Herodias as his wife, his brother Philip's wife. It is said, there was one man whose name was John who baptized. John the Baptist was proclaiming the God affair. One day John the Baptist then arrived into the town of King Herod. There John the Baptist came to understand that King Herod took Herodias as his wife, his brother Philip's wife. John the Baptist then went to King Herod and said to him, "You have spoilt the law for when you took your brother's wife as your wife." These words then hurt both King Herod and Herodias. Herodias then had a pain for John the Baptist and she wanted to kill John the Baptist. King Herod then thought that he could not do it, because he King Herod was afraid that many people believed John the Baptist, they followed him, and John the Baptist was a man of God. Even that, to please Herodias, King Herod then let his soldiers seize John the Baptist, tie him and throw him in prison. It came to be that one day on which King Herod was born came. To rejoice for this day, King Herod then prepared a big feast. He then called his elders in the country, his people who judge people, and the leaders of the soldiers to come and rejoice with him. To rejoice with King Herod, Herodias' daughter then came to dance in the face of King Herod and the people he called to the feast. The dancing of the girl pleased King Herod very much and the people he called to the feast. King Herod then called the girl to him and said to her, "Girl, your dancing made me to feel sweet very much. What do you want me to give to you? Anything that you ask me for I will give it to you. I swear in the presence of all these people whom I called to this feast, even if you say half of my kingdom." The girl then went with a run to her mother Herodias and said, "My dancing has pleased King Herod and the people whom he called to the feast, and he has sworn in the presence of all the people whom he has called to the feast that anything I ask for he will give it to me, even if I say half of his Kingdom. That is why I come running with haste to consult with you. What am I going to ask for?" Herodias, because she has a pain for John the Baptist, the time has arrived to remove from her the John the Baptist pain. Herodias then answered her daughter, "Go tell King Herod that you want the head of John the Baptist on a plate." The girl then returned immediately with haste to King Herod and told him, "I want the head of John the Baptist on a plate." The thing the girl wanted King Herod to give her made King Herod feel sorrowful. But because King Herod had sworn in the presence of the people whom he had called to the feast made him to send one of the soldiers that were guarding him to cut off the head of John the Baptist in prison. The soldier went and cut off the head of John the Baptist and brought it on a plate to King Herod. King Herod then told the soldier to give the girl the head of John the Baptist. The girl then carried the head of John the Baptist to her mother Herodias. When the disciples of John the Baptist heard what had happened, they then came and took the body of John the Baptist and went to bury it.

RSV

For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." And she went out, and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the baptizer." And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders to

bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When the disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

What is striking about the workshop version is the rearrangement of parts of the story, the repetition of some details and the additional details which are not part of the RSV version of the story. I believe that these three types of changes are made in order to make the story cohesive in the translator's language, thereby reducing the strangeness of the RSV rendition. Interestingly enough, when the translator read the back-translation to people at the workshop, a translator from a neighbouring country responded straight away by saying, "That is clear!"

These three types of changes can be looked at in terms of frames and scripts. The one frame that I noticed in the translated version involves the concept of "birthday". Birthday celebrations, which is a shared frame between the NT and the Western world, are unknown in the translator's culture. Therefore, additional material was included in the translation to fill out what was left implicit in the RSV rendition of the birthday frame.

The other changes fall within the category of script. Note the elaborate way in which the translated version begins. There appears to be a set pattern for introducing the people in the story and for informing the audience as to how they happened to come together. These details were left implicit in the original version because of the script that was used in the Greek cultural setting. But they could not be left implicit in the translator's language, or else the story would sound strange and not hold together.

The conversation between mother and daughter also appears to be a script. What could be assumed in the NT can not be left implicit in the translator's language. And in addition to this, the repetition of details making up the conversation serves to help the audience to remember what has happened. This probably falls within a general script about how to structure stories, similarly to the use of chiasm mentioned earlier. Also note the repetition of other details. For example, in the RSV rendition it is stated only once that the girl's dancing pleased King Herod. But in the translated version, this same information is stated twice.

I also noticed one other cohesive device, but it is neither a frame nor a script. It is the way in which people in a story are referred to. The difference between the RSV and the translated version's handling of pronouns is striking. The translated version has a more restricted usage of pronouns, especially in the subject position of main clauses. A deviation from the way a language normally refers to people in a story can greatly affect the cohesion of a story and make it sound extremely strange.

I believe that many times our Bible translations fail to make proper use of the cohesive devices of our own languages. And I believe that this is so because we tend to translate by sentences or clauses, or perhaps by verses. When we focus on such small pieces of text, we do not fully notice the place that each piece of information has in the total structure of the text. By doing this we fail

to notice many of the problems in pronoun usage, arrangement of content, and implicit information. When the translator works with larger pieces of text, he is better able to fit the content to the forms of his/her own language. In what follows I outline a possible method to help translators deal with larger pieces of text.

The translated version above, as it stands, is not adequate for Bible translation purposes. Some material has been omitted from verse 20, for example. And the reordering of material may be more than many Christians are willing to allow as actual translation (as opposed to paraphrase). But I believe that the magnitude of the differences between the RSV and the translated text shows that translators need to take more seriously the problem of cohesion and to look at cohesion on a deeper level—that of decisions regarding frames and scripts, that is, in particular, what must be stated and the arrangement of those things in the translation.

One method I have used for translating from Russian to English helps in making the translation more cohesive. It appears to have the benefits of freeing the translator from rigidly following the forms of the source text and of helping to prevent errors from memory lapses. It also helps to keep the translator from straying too widely from the organization of the source text. In this method much of the work is done before the translator begins to write anything.

The translation team first works through a reasonably long section of the text until the team is able to make a fairly accurate oral rendition of the text without stumbling and hesitating. You need to work on as much as a chapter at a time in order to get a feel for where the text is going, that is, what is the theme or the point. This is important so that the translator knows how to fit each piece of information into a cohesive structure.

Then the next step is to go through the text again by paragraphs. Each paragraph should be worked out orally first so that the translation is clear, accurate and natural, and spoken with no hesitation or stumbling. Then the oral translation is put down in writing. During each stage of the process, the team makes constant reference to the source text to ensure that all pieces of information in the source are included in the translation; but the team does not put anything in writing until an entire paragraph had begun to flow smoothly (that is, naturally and clearly) in an oral form. Only then does the team make a written translation.

In my own case, the English in translations produced by this method was better (more natural and more idiomatic) than in translations produced when I worked with small units of text, such as sentences and clauses. A second advantage was that for a given piece of text, the time required to make a translation was reduced to about half of what had been required when I worked by using smaller units of source text.