

understand. As a result of its use in many parts of the world, and of further comments received since then, a third edition is now being prepared.

No translation ever claims to be perfect, and no one more than the translator himself is aware of a translation's faults and deficiencies. That is why the Bible Societies always welcome positive constructive criticism of the translations they publish. The TEV New Testament has profited immeasurably from the comments and suggestions made by readers in this country and elsewhere. It is in order to demonstrate our gratitude for the help received from so many friends, and to help explain to all interested readers the nature and purpose of the TEV New Testament, that this paper has been written. It is hoped that this will help make this translation even more effective in communicating the Good News of salvation to everyone, as the Bible Societies provide the Bible to all peoples everywhere at a price they can pay and in a language they can understand.

JAN DE WAARD

DO YOU USE "CLEAN LANGUAGE"?

Old Testament Euphemisms and Their Translation

Dr. Jan de Waard is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Yaoundé, Cameroun.

I. Introduction

"Clean language" (*lašon nakf*) is the Hebrew equivalent for "euphemism", and this term is already used in the Midrash Rabba on Genesis. So when it is said of Potiphar (Gen. 39:6) that "he had no concern for anything but the food which he ate", Midrash Rabba on Genesis, Section 86, comments that the expression "the bread which he ate" is a "decent expression" or euphemism for "his marital life".¹

This raises the question what a euphemism exactly is. Several definitions have been proposed. E.g. a euphemism is a figure by which a less distasteful word or expression is substituted for one more exactly descriptive of what is intended.² Or, a euphemism is a figure of speech in which an unpleasant or coarse phrase is replaced by a softer or less offensive expression.³ However, both definitions are merely descriptive and they do not explain why certain substitutes are used. On the other hand, such an explanation is given in the following definition: a euphemism is a word or expression which is used in ordinary circumstances as a substitute for a taboo word.⁴ In the case of a

¹ We are only concerned here with the use of the terminology *lašon nakf*, not with the question whether it is correct to see here the use of a euphemism. Modern exegesis is inclined to take the expression "the food which he ate" literally, or to see in v.6 a ritual separation, Joseph being in charge of everything except the kitchen.

² William Little and C. T. Onions, *The Oxford Universal Dictionary*, Oxford, 1955.

³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1955.

⁴ E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden, 1969, Glossary. For a fuller description see the chapter on connotative meaning, esp. p. 91.

verbal taboo the associations surrounding some words become so strong that we avoid using these words at all.

A verbal taboo may be positive on the one hand, or negative on the other. Positive verbal taboos are associated with feelings of fear and awe. There are certain words, particularly the names of gods, which are regarded as being charged with power, and misuse of these words may destroy him who pronounces them. Negative verbal taboos, on the contrary, are associated with feelings of disgust and they are, e.g., directed against words referring to certain body organs and functions.

There are a number of positive verbal taboos in the Old Testament: the traditional Jewish avoidance of saying the name of God, YHWH; the use of the verb *bārak*, "to bless" for "to curse" (1 Kings 21:10); the avoidance of the mention of death⁶ and of the name of certain diseases, as in Lev. 13:4ff where leprosy is called "mark", "stroke", and where the same word is used for the diseased person. There are also negative verbal taboos in connection with certain body organs and certain physical functions, and more specifically with regard to sexual life.

Linguistically, there are different ways to change the concrete distasteful expression: (1) the form of a word may be changed, as in French *par bleu* for *par Dieu*; (2) foreign words and loans may be used (especially medical terms); (3) or antiphrasis, i.e. words of a good sense are used in place of those of a contrary sense; (4) or personal pronouns; (5) an acrostic abbreviation may be used; (6) or a so-called periphrasis, i.e. evasive expressions; (7) another way is the use of ellipsis, i.e. a stereotyped omission of some information from a discourse; (8) or of aposiopesis, i.e. a sudden breaking-off in speech; (9) or a generalization; (10) litotes, i.e. an understatement, can be used; (11) or a metaphor; (12) or a description.⁷

All the substitutes described above are universal, which does not mean, of course, that all of them can be applied to one specific language. In the case of Old Testament Hebrew, the following substitutes are used: (3) antiphrasis as in the example cited above where "to bless" is used for "to curse"; (4) personal pronouns, e.g. in Deut. 32:39: "See now that I, even I, am *he*, and there is no god beside me"; (6) periphrasis, e.g. in 1 Sam. 3:17: "May God do so to you and more also", where we find an evasive expression for the concrete curse; (7) ellipsis as in the example cited under (6) where we also have to do with a stereotyped omission of concrete diseases; (9) generalization, e.g. the use of Adonai for YHWH; and (11) metaphors as "let me lie with my fathers" (Gen. 47:30) for "to be buried".

In this article we propose first of all to give a selected number of O.T.

⁵ I. Opelt in his thorough comparative study of Greek, Latin and Hebrew euphemisms (*Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum VI*, Stuttgart, 1966) observes that the field of application in Hebrew is not different from that in Greek and Latin. The only difference is that it is structured in a different way. Moreover, the old (superstitious) verbal taboo is predominant in Biblical Hebrew.

⁶ Compare M. D. Goldman, *Euphemism for Dying and Its Implications*, AustralBiblRev 1 (1951), p. 64f.; 3 (1953), p. 51.

⁷ For the latter see G. Balharek: *Euphemia, Euphemismos in der Antike und neuzeitlicher Gebrauch des Terminus Euphemismus*, 60-2 (unpublished doctoral diss., Heidelberg, 1958).

euphemisms grouped according to different subjects. We then want to deal briefly with each of these euphemisms from the point of view of exegesis. Afterwards we proceed to the translational side in presenting the dynamic equivalents of these selected Hebrew euphemisms in an African language (Bamoun). In a final, more theoretical part, we propose to deal with problems of transfer and linguistic (cultural) adjustments, and to set up general principles for the translation of Biblical euphemisms.

II. Selected Old Testament Euphemisms

The euphemisms cited below are grouped as follows: *A.* Physical life; *B.* Sexual organs; *C.* Sexual intercourse; *D.* Death⁸.

- | | |
|--|---------------|
| <i>A.</i> (1) it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women | (Gen. 18:11) |
| (2) the way of women is upon me | (Gen. 31:35) |
| (3) So Saul went in to cover his feet | (1 Sam. 24:3) |
|
 | |
| <i>B.</i> (1) And Ham saw the nakedness of his father | (Gen. 9:22) |
| (2) Put your hand under my thigh | (Gen. 24:2) |
|
 | |
| <i>C.</i> (1) go in to my maid | (Gen. 16:2) |
| (2) a virgin, whom no man had known | (Gen. 24:16) |
| (3) he seized her and lay with her and humbled her | (Gen. 34:2) |
| (4) because you went up to your father's bed | (Gen. 49:4) |
| (5) a man shall not uncover his father's skirt | (Deut. 22:30) |
|
 | |
| <i>D.</i> (1) And as her soul was departing | (Gen. 35:18) |
| (2) but let me lie with my fathers | (Gen. 47:30) |
| (3) I am to be gathered to my people | (Gen. 49:29) |
| (4) And now I am about to go the way of all the earth | (Josh. 23:14) |
| (5) before I depart and be no more | (Psa. 39:13) |

III. Exegetical Notes

A. The examples (1) and (2) concern menstruation. In (1) the Hebrew word *'ōrah* (path, way) is used in a figurative sense for the menses. In fact, there are only two cases in the O.T. in which the figurative meaning is used with a special reference, here of menstruation and in Job 16:22 of death: "I shall go the way whence I shall not return".⁹ In (2) the Hebrew synonym *derek* is used meaning "customary experience or condition". Women in

⁸ The English translation quoted is that of the Revised Standard Version except for A (3) where the translation of Powis Smith-Goodspeed is followed.

⁹ See Koehler-Baumgartner: *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, Lieferung I, Leiden, 1967; and Driver-Briggs: *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1966.

this condition were protected by a powerful taboo.¹⁰ They were regarded as unclean for seven days (Lev. 15:19). In the passage Gen. 31:33-35 the worthlessness of Laban's household gods is clearly accentuated; an unclean woman sat upon them!¹¹ (3) has to do with excretion. In following Smith-Goodspeed we keep the literal translation of the Hebrew expression whereas most modern English versions prefer to use a clear English euphemism: "Saul went in to relieve himself" (so Moffatt, R.S.V., N.E.B.). To "cover his feet" means "to cover his feet with long garments", a euphemism for evacuating the bowels, from the posture assumed (Driver-Briggs). The same expression occurs in Jud. 3:24. There is almost complete unanimity among the ancient authorities with regard to the meaning of this euphemism, as may be seen from the following translations: "to prepare himself" (LXX); "to evacuate" (Aquila); to "make haste because of natural things" (Josephus); "to purge the stomach" (Vulgate); "to do his needs" (Targum). The only exception is the Syriac version which makes Saul sleep¹².

B. The examples cited deal with two different Hebrew euphemisms for the sexual organ of men. In (1) Hebrew 'erwāh (nakedness) is euphemistically used for "pudenda" (Driver-Briggs); in (2) yārek (thigh) also refers to the genital organs. In the second example the reference is to an oath by the genital organs, and we have to do here with a very old custom, a survival of primitive religion whose significance had very probably been forgotten in Israel. The idea of a specific holiness of the genital organs may have been implicit as they probably functioned as emblems of the life-giving power of deity. Later Jewish exegesis considered the oath by the genital organs as an appeal to the covenant of circumcision¹³ or as a symbol of subjection,¹⁴ whereas a number of older commentators see here an invoking of posterity in order to maintain the sanctity of the oath.¹⁵ However, all these explanations are certainly later rationalizations. This ceremony occurs only once more in the O.T., in Gen. 47:29 in the context of a deathbed scene. Is it only the imminence of death which can account for such an action?¹⁶

¹⁰ So rightly John Skinner: *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, Edinburgh, 1956, *ad. loc.*

¹¹ Compare G. von Rad: *Das erste Buch Mose* (ATD), Göttingen, 1956, *ad. loc.*

¹² Compare H. P. Smith: *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, Edinburgh, 1961, *ad. loc.* It is not clear whether LXX and Aquila use existing Greek euphemisms. According to Opelt (*art. cit.*) Greek euphemisms in the area of excretion have not yet been found. This in contrast with the numerous euphemisms on the subject found in Latin.

¹³ So e.g. Targum Jonathan, Rabbi Shelomoh Yizhaki. The same opinion is shared by Jerome in his "*Questiones sive traditiones hebraicae in Genesisim*".

¹⁴ So Abraham Ibn Ezra.

¹⁵ So e.g. H. Ewald: *Antiquities of Israel* (English trans. 1876), 19, 6; A. Dillmann: *Die Genesis*, 1892, p. 301.

¹⁶ So Skinner, *op. cit.*, *ad. loc.*

C. All the examples cited concern sexual intercourse. In (1) the expression "go in to" may contain a reference to entering a woman's tent or apartment with the implication of sexual relations (Driver-Briggs). In the O.T. there are numerous occurrences of the same euphemism, e.g. Gen. 30:3; 38:8; Deut. 22:13; 2 Sam. 16:21 etc. As to the sources of the Pentateuch, it is important to note that the use of this euphemism is characteristic of the combined narrative of the Jahwist and the Elohist, and more particularly of the Jahwistic narrative. In (2) "to know" means "to know a person carnally" (Driver-Briggs). A man may be the subject as here and in Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 38:26; Jud. 19:25; 1 Sam. 1:19; 1 Kings 1:4; or a woman may be the subject as in Gen. 19:8; Num. 31:17, 18, 35; Jud. 11:39. In the case of sodomy a man is both subject and object: Gen. 19:5; Jud. 19:22. In the Pentateuch this euphemism is predominantly used in the Jahwistic narrative. (3) presents the euphemism *šakab* (to lie with) for sexual relations. Here as in Gen. 26:10; 34:7; 35:22; 1 Sam. 2:22; 2 Sam. 13:14 etc. the verb is followed by the particle *'et*. In the Pentateuch again this euphemism seems to be characteristic of the Jahwistic narrative. The same example offers us a second euphemism in the verb *'ānāh* (II.: to humble) used for "to humble a woman by cohabitation". In (4) some exegetes see a reference to the persistence in Reuben of an old Semitic custom of marriage with wives or concubines of a (deceased!) father.¹⁷ Such a custom would no longer have been acceptable to the later moral standards of Israel. Such an explanation would imply that Gen. 35:22 with its particular mention of Bilhah was a later development of the legend contained in 49:4. However, this theory is highly questionable. A cautious exegesis can only see in Gen. 35:22 a fragmentary indication of a crime of Reuben which on the whole remains obscure.¹⁸ In (5) the euphemism "to uncover his father's skirt" could be explained by another euphemism expressing the opposite: to spread one's skirt over somebody (e.g. Ezek. 16:8) meaning "to marry someone". Even then it has still to be explained exactly what the expression "to uncover his father's skirt" means. Some exegetes see here a warning against a marriage with a step-mother.¹⁹ Such an incestuous marriage current in polygamous societies (e.g. among the Hittites)²⁰ was indeed rejected by the Semites in general.²¹ However, v. 30 consists of two parts, and it is highly improbable that the second part simply repeats the information of the first. So we should see in v. 30 a double warning: first against marrying one's step-mother, and then against having illegitimate sexual relations with the wife of one's father.²²

¹⁷ Compare B. Stade: *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, i. p. 151 f.; Skinner, *op. cit.*, *ad. loc.*

¹⁸ So rightly G. von Rad, *op. cit.*, *ad. loc.*

¹⁹ E.g. P. Buis and Jacques Leclercq: *Le Deutéronome, Sources Bibliques*, Paris, 1963, *ad. loc.*

²⁰ Par. 190 of the Hittite Law Code (Tablet II) says that there is no punishment for intercourse with a stepmother after the death of the father.

²¹ Compare Codex Hammurabi 158 and Koran IV, 26.

²² So rightly Ed. König: *Das Deuteronomium*, Kommentar zum Alten Testament, Leipzig, 1917, *ad. loc.*

D. In this series of euphemisms concerning death, (1) clearly stands for "when she was expiring" (Driver-Briggs). Here we have to do with the departure of the *nepes̄* (soul), but it can elsewhere also be said that the *rûah̄* (spirit, breath) departs (Psa. 146:4). It is important to note that both soul and body, being a unity, die at the same time (compare Jud. 16:30; Job 11:20; Ezek. 22:25, 27). When it is said that the soul departs when it dies or that the soul returns when it is revived (1 Kings 17:21, 22), these expressions "do not imply that death consists in the departure of the soul from the body, so that the soul is untouched, but goes elsewhere".²³

As to (2), the euphemism "to lie with one's fathers" is especially used of kings (e.g. 1 Kings 1:21; 2:10 and 35 times). The Genesis text belongs again to the Jahwistic narrative. Originally this phrase denoted burial in the family sepulchre. Later on the idea may have been that of lying with one's fathers in *š'ol*, the underworld. As the underworld consisted of a vast aggregate of graves according to popular conception, this euphemism could even be used in the case of men buried far from their ancestors. The euphemism (3) for "to die" recurs a number of times in the Pentateuch: Gen. 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:29, 33; Num. 20:24; 27:13; 31:2; Deut. 32:50; but all these texts, in contrast with the foregoing, belong to the Priestly author. The translation "people" (RSV) is not correct, the Hebrew word *'am* having here the meaning "paternal uncle", "kinsman", a meaning current in Arabic but exceptional in Hebrew.²⁴ It is possible that this had become a rather hackneyed expression.

(4) is also used in 1 Kings 2:2 by King David. The expression, "the way of all the earth", seems to be deuteronomistic, though we may have to do with an old, traditional expression adapted by the deuteronomist.²⁵ In (5) the euphemism "to go", "to depart" means "to pass away", "to die". Possibly another occurrence of this is to be found in Gen. 15:2, which belongs again to the combined narrative of the Jahwist and the Elohist. Baumgartner (s.v.) takes the Hebrew verb *hālak* (to go) in that sense. Driver-Briggs hesitates between the meaning "to die" and "to live". The same difference of opinion is shown in English translations: "when I am going to die childless" (Moffatt) and "for I continue childless" (RSV). Something might be said in favour of the meaning "continue to live childless", as the meaning of the verb *hālak* in Psa. 39:13 has to be made explicit in the same verse: "and be no more".²⁶ However, no absolute certainty can be obtained.

²³ Johs. Pedersen: *Israel, Its Life and Culture*, I-II, London-Copenhagen, 1946, pp. 179-180.

²⁴ Theophile J. Meek (in Smith-Goodspeed) translates correctly: "I am about to be gathered to my fathers."

²⁵ Compare Martin Noth: *Biblischer Kommentar XI*, I: Könige, Neukirchen, 1964. *ad. loc.* and J. A. Montgomery-H. Snyder Gehman: *The Book of Kings*, ICC, Edinburgh, 1960, *ad. loc.* Compare also the euphemism used in Eccl. 3:20.

²⁶ In the Genesis text we have to do with the beginning of the Elohist narrative, and it is possible that in the original redaction of this narrative this conversation took place in Mesopotamia, in which case the expression is certainly used in the ordinary, literal sense: "I set out without having a child" (so von Rad, *op. cit.*, *ad. loc.*).

IV. Dynamic Equivalents in Bamoun²⁷

- A. (1) Sarah had no longer the illness of women (Sarah saw no longer the moon).
 (2) I have the illness of women (I see the moon).
 (3) Saul went to throw his hand.
- B. (1) Ham saw the nakedness of his father.
 (2) Lick my forehead.
- C. (1) Come near to my servant-maid.
 (2) a virgin, whom no man had known.
 (3) he took her, slept with her, spoiled her.
 (4) because you slept in the bed of your father.
 (5) no man shall see the nakedness of the wife of his father (nobody shall sit down on the bed of his father).
- D. (1) as her spirit was nearly finished.
 (2) let me join my fathers.
 (3) I am going to catch up with my people.
 (4) (a) And now I am about to go the unique way by which all men pass.
 (b) And now I am near my abode.
 (5) Before I go and be no more.

V. Principles of Translation

Let us return to the question asked in the title: "Do you use clean language?" For, though the use of euphemisms is universal, it may be more pronounced in one culture than in another. The field of application may also be structured in different ways in different cultures. Take e.g. contemporary Anglo-American culture in which there is a tendency to replace hitherto used substitutes for death by direct references, and in which direct language is certainly more used in the area of physical and sexual life. What is the task of the translator in such a case? Does he have to translate the Hebrew

²⁷ Bamoun is one of the so-called Bantoid languages spoken by more than 100,000 people in the Fouban area north of the Noun river (western part of East Cameroun). The N.T. and the Psalms have been published recently (*Kèn mfè ne Yuopnké*, Soc. Biblique Cameroun-Gabon, Yaoundé, 1969) and the translators are now engaged in O.T. translation. A first grammar of the language is being written now. It is not yet possible to give a complete description of all the positive and negative verbal taboos and of all the substitutes. A number of correspondences with Hebrew usage have been detected. Among the positive verbal taboos in Bamoun we find the same avoidance of the names of certain diseases: "convulsion" is called *yâ pon* (illness of children) by generalization (substitute 9), and the "technical" term for leprosy, *kine*, is very often replaced by the descriptive expression *yâ pa tù nka* (illness of those who are in fenced places—substitute 12). For several pieces of information we are indebted to Rev. Rodolphe Peshandon, Rev. Moïse Lamere and Mr. Joseph Ndouop. In the list of dynamic equivalents in Bamoun we give occasionally between brackets deviating euphemisms from a related language: Bamiléké. For geographical and linguistic details on this subject see our article in TBT 19 (1968), pp. 131-143.

euphemism literally even if it is not understood, or should he give a direct translation of the meaning of such a euphemism in the receptor language? It is interesting to note that a modern dynamic translation like TEV in its provisional form opts clearly for the second solution.²⁸ To illustrate this we give the text of some of our selected euphemisms in this translation: *A* (1): "Sarah had stopped having her monthly periods"; *C* (1): "Why don't you have sexual relations with my slave?"; *C* (4): "because you had sexual relations with a wife of your father"; *D* (2): "I want to be buried where my fathers are".

However, there are other cultures or other fields of application within the same culture where euphemisms are currently used. What is the position of the translator here? Does he have to translate the Hebrew euphemism literally, or should he replace it by a euphemism typical of the receptor language? In the case of English, more than one translation has opted for the second solution. To give a few examples again: *A* (3): "Saul went in to relieve himself" (RSV, NEB); *B* (2): "place your hand between my legs" (TEV).

From the examples given above, it is clear what has happened: the form of the Hebrew euphemism has been sacrificed to a greater or lesser extent, whereas the meaning has been transferred. However, translation is a translation not only of meaning but also of form, and we have to do justice to the cultural and linguistic values of the source language as well as to those same values in the receptor language.²⁹ Such a procedure surely does not simplify the task of the translator. Let us make more specific what we mean. In the list of dynamic equivalents in Bamoun there are a number of items which can be considered not only as dynamic equivalents but also as complete or almost complete formal equivalents, such as *B* (1), *C* (1), (2) (3), *D* (5). In view of the identity of source and receptor language, there are no problems for the translator. A minor problem is presented in the case of *D* (4) where there are two dynamic equivalents in Bamoun of the same euphemism in Hebrew. However, it is clear that *D* (4a) is also a formal equivalent of the Hebrew, the more so as "the way by which all men pass" is a simple back-transformation of "the way of all the earth". On the base of what has been said above, namely, that we have to do justice to both form and meaning, the translator will have to select the equivalent (4a).

There are, however, also some marked differences as to the way in which source and receptor language refer euphemistically to the same thing, as in the case of *A* (3) and *B* (2). The Bamoun gesture indicated in *B* (2) seems to be a full dynamic equivalent as it is only practised in the context of oath-taking, and as it seems to bear the same primitive significance as in Hebrew culture. But the referent is radically different and the expression is no

²⁸ The quotations are from a provisional draft of Genesis (Stage II) mimeographed by the American Bible Society.

²⁹ Participants of the Lumko Institute (December 1970) will remember some lengthy discussions on this subject especially between Dr. Loewen and the author. This article is an attempt not to defend exclusively one point of view, but to give a balanced statement of both standpoints taken in that discussion.

euphemism at all.³⁰ Moreover, all the remaining examples show the same type of differences, only to a lesser extent. How has the translator to deal with these more complicated translation problems? In accordance with the principles developed above, he has to "cross the river" twice, once with the form and once with the meaning. This means that he has to present the formal and the dynamic equivalent of the Hebrew euphemism in the receptor language. However, the formal result of such a double "crossing" may be different from case to case. The attempt should first be made to put both equivalents into the body of the text. But such an attempt should by no means be forced through at the expense of the naturalness of the receptor language, because one of the basic principles in translation is to restructure the decoded source message in *natural* language for the receptors. Especially with regard to situations in which we have to do with first translations and many new readers, we should look for a readable text which by its naturalness of expression arouses sufficient interest, and we should avoid a double transfer of form and meaning within the same text if this results in too heavy a burden for the new reader. In such instances the formal equivalent should be added in a footnote whereas the dynamic rendering should figure in the text.³¹

We are well aware of the fact that the above-mentioned principles do not only concern euphemisms, and that they also may have some consequences for the translation of other figures of speech which we cannot consider within the framework of this article. We do not pretend to have given an exhaustive discussion of this subject, and we only hope that the outline of these principles may give rise to further discussion.

³⁰ However, traces of the same Hebrew ritual seem to have been found in various parts of the world. Compare A. Jeremias: *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des Alten Orients*, 1906, p. 395, and see especially the striking Australian parallel cited by G. J. Spurrell (*Notes on the Text of the Book of Genesis*, 1896, p. 218) from Sir G. Grey: "One native remains seated on the ground with his heels tucked under him . . . ; the one who is about to narrate a death to him approaches . . . and seats himself cross-legged upon the thighs of the other; . . . and the one who is seated uppermost places his hands under the thighs of his friend; . . . an inviolable pledge to avenge the death has by this ceremony passed between the two." According to Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) this ceremony was still a custom in India in his days.

³¹ It has to be noted that no modern English translation follows consistently a clear principle of translation in this respect.