

ANDREI S. DESNITSKY

TRAINING TRANSLATION TEAMS

The author is a translation consultant with the Institute for Bible Translation based in Russia.

The Institute for Bible Translation (IBT) works in those countries that were formerly part of the USSR, with the exception of the three Baltic States. The situation in these countries is in some senses different from what we see in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific which seem to be the main areas where the Bible agencies have been working in the last century. Mostly, the speakers of our receptor languages have at their disposal literary traditions that have existed for many decades, if not for centuries. Paradoxically, this favourable soil was prepared by the Soviet regime, which endorsed the linguistic description and literary development of pre-literate languages. No matter how awkward the slogan "Soviet culture, multinational in form and Socialist in content" may seem now, it played a positive role in bridging cultural gaps and creating national schools of translators. At the same time, no organised Bible study was allowed except in the few theological seminaries that remained for training priests.

So, our typical translators are professional writers, journalists or scholars who are masters of their own language, who have been already trained as translators but who know little about the Bible. Needless to say, all translators are native speakers of the receptor language.

According to the partnership agreements between IBT, SIL, and UBS, we have the following requirements for our translators:

- being ready to work in a team, i.e., willing to accept criticism and improve their own drafts as a result of it;
- being teachable;
- respect for the message of the Bible;
- full command of the mother tongue;
- writing skills;
- a good knowledge of and respect for their own culture and literature;
- fluency in a major language other than the mother tongue (which usually means Russian).

In IBT we do not believe in teaching people how to write in the receptor language. If they are good in everything else but lack this skill, they may be given another task, perhaps within the same project. Other qualifications, such as being a Christian believer or knowing some English, are desirable but not essential for a translator.

Sometimes we are asked: how can a person who is not a Christian, who does not know much about the world of the Bible, become a Bible translator? Our answer is that a qualified helper is needed for such a person. This person will be a Christian with some formal education in biblical studies who helps the translator and checks the quality of his work. We call such a person an

exegetical checker or simply *exegete*. Very rarely can such a person be found among the native speakers of the receptor language. More typically, it would be a young Russian or Westerner who has learned the receptor language. We find combining the strengths of two people to be optimal for our task.

An exegete is expected to have a university degree (preferably in philology, linguistics or biblical studies), a good knowledge of the Bible, and the ability to communicate in English. There are some other skills which can be acquired by an exegete in the process of training, although a typical candidate for this position has learned a few of them already. Here is an official list of such skills from IBT-SIL-UBS partnership documents:

- knowledge of Ancient Greek (for NT projects); knowledge of Hebrew and Ancient Greek (for OT projects);
- working knowledge of computers (Windows and Microsoft Word);
- exegetical skills: a knowledge of the principles of biblical interpretation, and the ability to apply them to the text in a way as free as possible from personal theological, denominational, etc. prejudices;
- basic knowledge of textual criticism, and the ability to use the textual apparatus of BHS and NA27 to make textual decisions;
- knowledge of the historical background of the Bible and of key characteristics of the biblical books as literature;
- knowledge of translation principles and the ability to apply them in practical work;
- linguistic skills: a knowledge of linguistic theory enabling one to deal with languages different from major European languages;
- knowledge of the target language (ability to read and understand the text);
- knowledge of the key exegetical tools such as handbooks, commentaries, computer programs (at least Paratext and Translator's Workplace) and the ability to use them;
- cross-cultural awareness.

In fact, all the exegetes who have joined IBT recently already knew the biblical languages well enough before they applied for this role in a project, but none of them had a sufficient knowledge of the receptor language. So, now they usually come from the "theological" camp (a decade ago most of them were linguists).

This pair, the translator and the exegetical checker, form the core of a translation team which also includes other members such as a stylist, a project coordinator, a field comprehension tester and, fairly often, other translators and exegetes. Roles are often shared: an exegete can be a coordinator or a tester at the same time. An advanced translator can eventually become an independent translator (i.e., one who can work with the original text and the secondary sources, receiving some input only from the consultant), and then even an exegete who helps other translators. Such cases are rather rare but they do occur. Consultants are not team members in the strict sense of the word since each of them is involved in a number of projects. Nevertheless it is better

if they do not regard themselves as knowing everything, and who descend on translation teams from the heavens.

When a new team member is joining the project, he will most likely be invited to Moscow for a one-week beginners' seminar. These are held almost every year. The main goal of these seminars is to explain the basics of our work, to introduce a newcomer both to the head office and to his colleagues from other regions. In fact, "horizontal" contacts (between colleagues in different projects) are no less important for training than "vertical" ones (between a translation group and the head office). This is just a beginning, however.

Then, some training is organised on the job. Before signing a long-term contract, translators are offered a trial text to translate, and this is a good opportunity for them and their exegetes to see how they can work together in the future. Needless to say, each team is different and much time may be required just for building the team. A translation consultant needs to put a heavy emphasis on this at the early stages of a project although a group may wish to produce drafts as fast as possible right from the beginning. Unfortunately, such hasty drafts may end up in the wastepaper basket if the team members have not achieved a common vision of their goals before starting to work on it.

A similar sort of trial period is required for exegetes as well, although they often find themselves in a position different from that of a new translator. We are working with translators who already know well how to deal with a text in another language; what they lack is some specific features of Bible translation and team work. Most of the new exegetes, however, have no experience in the practice of exegesis. After completing a course in a university or seminary, a person may know quite a lot about the Bible and theology in general, but the skill of analysing the text and determining its meaning does not come automatically with such general knowledge. So, an exegete will also have a trial contract as a beginner.

For a time, we used a particular form of training for exegetes. A group of young people with master's degrees in theology expressed their wish to work in IBT projects as exegetes. All of them stayed in Moscow, so they could meet regularly. Once a month we had a mini-seminar for them. Such a seminar lasted for several hours and consisted of two parts. The first part was theoretical, with presentations from a certain area of knowledge (such as linguistics, hermeneutics, or biblical studies). Ideally, each participant was supposed to contribute actively to such a discussion. The second part was practical. We worked on an interlinear draft from a real project and discussed the problems we encountered as well as possible solutions. As some of these people are now working in our projects, we can see that this was a fruitful method of training. The quality of their work is quite satisfactory.

Besides knowledge and skills, every newcomer has some other things to learn, namely, translation procedures and team structure. One might say that our contracts and job descriptions state quite clearly who is doing what and who is responsible for what. However, the team members inevitably have to

accept this distribution of responsibilities and to build up working relationships in their own group, combining the strengths of each member of the team. Reading a contract is not enough for that, so we usually invite newcomers to observe the work of a certain group and to share with the “veterans.”

Another issue is cross-cultural and cross-denominational communication. It is fairly usual that a group unites people with different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. What goes without saying for one member of the team may seem shocking to another. This refers not just to exegetical and theological issues but to their conduct and manners as well. People who have lived all their lives in the same cultural environment are usually unaware of such differences. They may be deeply surprised to discover how the way they talk (just like people always talk, don't they?) may send wrong messages and seriously affect the work of the whole group.

It is not uncommon to see that even a benevolent and helpful translation officer looks down upon translators as “uncivilised savages” without even realising it. In our seminars for exegetes we have included certain elements of cross-cultural communication. I believe that more emphasis should be put on this in future.

Now, when we have what can be called a team (although some people can come and go in the process), we can think of training this team as a unit. In fact, each team has some training potential within itself. To give a real life example, the translator of the Yakut Psalter gives lessons in Yakut language to her exegete, while she, in return, teaches the translator Hebrew. But such training within the team is not enough, of course. Teams can also share a common experience when they gather in one place, for instance, for a workshop. Their experience and knowledge can and should be complemented by some input from experts—this is the recipe for proper training.

In an ideal world, we would be sending translation groups to a good college for a proper course in Bible translation, preferably in the West. Unfortunately, Russian colleges are only now developing courses in Bible, and none of them is oriented towards the art of translation. In the world we live in, however, the most adventurous trip ever took place in 1998 when a number of our translators went to Israel for a two-week course organised by UBS. One cannot overestimate the benefits of such a course. Just the feeling of having been there, seeing the same stars as the patriarchs did, and touching the same “dust of the earth” with one's own fingers make an unforgettable impact on one's personal attitude to the text of the Bible (I speak from personal experience). Such trips are no longer an option, however.

The second best option is to organise major training events locally. For several years we held large partnership seminars twice a year in which IBT, SIL, and UBS personnel participated. It was the common opinion that such seminars were very helpful. At the same time, it was sometimes felt that the resources available were not used to their full potential. For instance, an expert was invited to give a lecture on a particular problem in the text. The lecture as such may have been brilliant, but the benefit that the audience got from it was

rather limited. This could happen if lectures are not properly adapted to the local milieu (it should be noted that the oral interpretation of a lecturer who speaks a foreign language takes up to 60% of the given time and inevitably leaves out certain details), or when the groups had no follow-up in the form of practical exercises or reading. In fact, the rare cases when we had prepared some localised material (like the UBS video tape "Bible Lands as Classroom" dubbed into Russian) showed that it helps a lot and is very well received by translation groups.

Now, due to financial constraints, we do not have such combined seminars any more. Sadly, many Bible agencies have been reducing their budgets in recent years. No one wants to sacrifice an active project, so some training events are cancelled instead. One may object that fairly often, a dollar spent on preparation and training saves ten dollars spent on editing hastily produced texts. Nevertheless, we have to face a situation when the most expensive events become unaffordable. This should not mean, however, that training must stop. Now, I will list some options that still remain open and look the most promising.

First of all, the importance of local, low-budget seminars should not be underestimated. I had the chance to participate at a seminar for discourse analysis of Turkic languages spoken in southwestern Siberia (Abakan, June 2001). Teams who were working in the same area with closely related languages gathered for one week to discuss their common problems and to look for solutions. Some participants came with a presentation on a particular feature of their language's discourse structure. Others heard the word "discourse" for the first time in their lives. But all agreed that the seminar was very helpful. For instance, the translators agreed that Turkic languages do not require repetition of the phrase "he said" in a dialogue; it may make a redundant emphasis. A short verbal form "said" put at the end of a direct speech will be enough, and even that is not compulsory.

Indeed, it is important to bring people engaged in Bible translation together to talk to each other. A colleague who has been struggling with the same problem sometimes is able to help more than a distinguished expert from afar.

As I have already noted, any training event can be successful only if there is some material available for further reading and reflection. Such material should not just be translated from English or any other major language; it must be truly localised. There was a bitter irony in the way that certain books about the meaning-based translation of the Bible were translated into Russian in the early 1990's. These were fairly literal translations, done rapidly by unqualified people, and they contradicted the very ideas they were trying to render. To give a brief example: in a linguistic book the key terms *topic*, *theme*, and *subject* were rendered by the same Russian word *tema* which simply gave no chance for readers to understand the nuances of the original text.

One must also notice that localising study aids is not just about changing the language and some culturally significant features of the source text. It also should imply adapting the training methods to the needs of the typical

audience. As was said above, our translators are usually highly educated people, so it is unlikely that they will benefit from a standard lecture for translators simply explaining the basics. One local translation group was puzzled by a Western consultant who started his lecture with a rather emphatic statement: "Look, words can have secondary meanings!" Obviously, he had prepared an introductory course for people with a relatively low educational level, which may be the case in some other regions, but this group consisted of people with university degrees in the humanities. They, however, may have benefited a lot from a lecture concentrated on the latest trends in Bible translation as such, an area which was much less familiar to them. In many cultures a person feels insulted when being taught the basics that only little children are not expected to know.

Then, one must also be careful about the philosophical and theological premises that lie behind our ways of teaching. The idea of "meaning-based translation" has been dominating our minds for so long that it is often tacitly taken as unconditionally shared by our translators and audiences. This is not true, however. It was also too easily forgotten by some that the form and the content of a text are inseparable from each other. Also that the traditional societies to which many of our readers belong tend to be rather conservative where sacred texts are concerned. Such conservatism may concern even the external appearance of a book. For instance, in some places the Bible will be accepted by local Christians only if it is printed in two columns per page with no paragraph breaks and no section headings. Why such a seemingly inconvenient layout? Just because this is the usual layout of the Russian Synodal version, the best known and the most authoritative text of the Bible in Russia and most other CIS countries except Georgia and Armenia which have their own venerable ancient versions.

This means that the audience already has some other expectations coming from their background. We are not working in an "exegetically sterile environment" which can be filled with any ideas and texts of our choice. Fairly often, the translation group has to compromise with the expectations of the local churches, and I think this is the right thing to do. For instance, the Chuvash group has chosen to follow the traditional base text for the New Testament (i.e., the ecclesiastical Greek text and not the critical one). It will be beneficial if a translation group at an early stage discusses with its consultant the main parameters of a project, its philosophy and theology, its relation to the intended audience and then build all the training as directed towards the chosen goal, not just "teaching to translate the Bible" in general.

Another example is of a translation team which has been working for a long time. The translators went to seminars, they did the exercises, and yet the exegete struggles with one of the translators almost every time he suggests introducing a word which is not present in the base text (such as translating "Jordan" as "Jordan river" for the sake of clarity). What was wrong with this group? Is this particular translator unsuitable for his job? Perhaps he is, but this does not account for the whole problem. In any case, he has been attending various training events where the "meaning-based translation" approach was

put forward as the only possible approach. Being very polite, he never objected, and yet he retained his attitude to the sacred text where no single word can be changed.

In fact, there are many translation groups that tend to be more "formal" than they were taught to be, although they rarely come to such an extreme position as described above. It is unquestionable that in translation we aim at rendering the meaning of the text, but this general task can be tackled in more than one way. Translator training can be of benefit if it is oriented towards a whole range of acceptable strategies, if it recognises a variety of options, if it is more descriptive and less prescriptive than it might have been in the past.

Recently, a new approach to training in our area was proposed by Michael Greed (SIL). His ultimate goal is to make the expatriate translation officers "not indispensable" by building up local personnel. Basically, this approach is commendable. Too often in the past we have been working from the top down, looking at what we can offer on the best academic level. Approaching training from the bottom up (which is most needed in our particular situation) can indeed be more effective. Still, it is not clear how exactly this approach should be implemented in real life.

Greed also has in mind a special person (a facilitator) who helps with training the team members. This brings us to an important question. Training remains within the field of responsibility of a translation consultant. In practice, however, the amount of training he can offer to each group is rather limited. I think that facilitators may indeed be helpful. As we know, training in some special areas such as computing or publishing matters is usually conducted by those who actually do this work in the head office. So in such areas as exegesis and linguistics, facilitators can greatly increase the pool of options from which a translation group together with its consultant can choose what seems most appropriate and necessary. Consultants sometimes hesitate about what sort of training and in what form will be most appropriate for a particular translation group in the rather limited amount of time that we have. Some help from an expert in training would certainly be appreciated. The person who knows something best is not necessarily the one who is able to teach it best. It is imperative, however, that the ultimate responsibility for training remain with the consultant.

Then, in our situation we need also to concentrate on preparing some study aids in the major language in our area, namely Russian. Such projects would not demand the huge costs that are unavoidable for a course or even a workshop. At the same time, they would provide all trainers with a powerful tool which can be used in a number of ways, including self-study. Experience shows that learning some basic methods of biblical exegesis is a real challenge for a beginning exegetical checker even if he or she has some solid educational background. The proposal to write an exegetical handbook still awaits final approval from IBT, SIL, and UBS, but in any case I am sure that this sort of study aid will be appearing more and more often in the future.

One does not need to reinvent the wheel, however. Some good sources are already available in English or other European languages and they can be

translated and localised. An example is the abridged Russian version of "Analysing the Psalms" by E. Wendland which has been prepared for a workshop on Psalms. A couple of Wendland's African examples were replaced by analogous examples from Siberia, which certainly gave our readers a clearer picture. One can only wish that more such materials will be made available in future—for instance, S.T.E.P.S., a collection on OT exegesis and translation prepared by an international team from SIL. This can also be used as an aid for self-study under the guidance of a consultant, a form of training which requires minimal expense and in some cases is the only available way of training.

In conclusion, we are just at the beginning of a rather long journey with regard to training translators. We have to identify our goals more clearly and choose our strategies more carefully. Close cooperation between Bible agencies will remain an important condition of our common success.

STEPHEN PATTEMORE, GRAHAM S. OGDEN

TRANSLATOR TRAINING IN THE UBS ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

Dr Pattemore is a UBS translation consultant living in New Zealand.

Dr Ogdren is a former UBS translation consultant living in Australia.

The quality of any translation, be it biblical or any other kind, will depend on the ability, the skill, and the sensitivity of the translator and the translation team responsible for the project. There are few more obvious truths. If translators are incompetent or insufficiently aware of what is involved in the translation process, then one cannot expect that the result of their work will qualify as a "good" translation. Of course, there are many elements one must consider before one can evaluate a translation as a "good" one. Whether it is at the level of understanding of the original text or source, the style of the translation, its readability or communicability, its elegance and naturalness, and so on, all are important factors.

In recognition of the need to ensure the quality of translations within the region and to continue to upgrade the level of training of translators in the Asia-Pacific region of the United Bible Societies, the region began a series of meetings in 1997 to address the issue. One of the starting points for the discussion was the fact that as new consultants were taken on, very few had ever had any previous experience of actual Bible translation projects. No matter how well trained they were in their specific areas of expertise, normally linguistics or biblical studies, few knew very much about translation itself. Yet, very soon after becoming involved in the program, they were expected to participate in workshops to train translators.

While everyone is agreed on the need to adequately train people to translate into their own languages, when it comes to the methods of training such people, and even to defining what adequate training consists of, there are