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LEARNING TO USE A HANDBOOK

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Background

The authors and the editors of the UBS Handbook Series are hungry for information on how well the Handbooks are being used by translation teams. They ask questions such as: "Are we explaining all the problems clearly?" "Are the translators being guided properly toward producing a version that is clear and that properly represents the ancient texts?"

Perhaps we need to ask an even more basic question: "Do translators know how to use a Handbook?" Translation workshops are conducted in many different parts of the world, and at such workshops people are trained in the skills needed for the important work of Bible translation. In this article I want to propose that thorough training of translators should include training in the skill of using a Handbook.

When translators use Handbooks they may find problems or errors in them. If the use of Handbooks is taught at training workshops, some translators may then be willing to point out ways in which the Handbooks can become more useful. And since no perfect Handbook has ever been published, we know that good translators will find the errors, and they should think of reporting them to their Translation Officer, who can then pass the information on to me as the editor of the Handbook Series.

The following material is a simple suggestion for one way of showing the need for Handbooks and for training people to use them properly. I am assuming here that it will be used at a training workshop for translators. After workshop leaders have used some of the ideas printed here, they will no doubt find better ways of teaching the subject, and will be able to share those improvements with other leaders and with me.

Procedure

At the translation workshop the Translation Officer will have supplied the people with one or more Handbooks, depending on what is available and perhaps depending also on what is about to be translated. This is to be a hands-on experience of working with a Handbook. Part of the material will be in conversation with the group, part as a challenge for them to discover things on their own, with written results. In all cases it will be up to the leader to determine whether a learning experience is to be in a group, by means of discussion, or whether it is to be through activity in a small group or even alone, with written results in any case.

Some translators may expect us to dig right into the work of translating, using this marvelous Handbook to guide us into all truth and clarity. Instead we will start with the front matter, then go on to the back matter, and finally reach the text itself.

An introduction to the topic

The following is a true story.

“There once was a pastor in a certain country known for its many languages. This man was an expert in his own language. He was well trained biblically and theologically, and he preached excellent sermons. In spite of the fact that his pastoral care for his flock was an example for other pastors, the Bible Society felt that his talents were needed for the basic work of translating God’s Word. His church agreed that he could give his time to this important cause.

He was also an excellent typist. He would come into the Bible Society in the morning, open the Bible to where he left off the previous day, and begin to type the continuation of his translation. He did it rapidly, with only the Bible before him; and soon the Gospel of Luke was ready to print as an experimental publication, as he went on to translate other books of the Bible. The translation of Luke was a failure. No one wanted to use it or buy it, not even as an experiment in their churches. Yet the man seemed to be a perfect candidate for the work of translation.”

What, in your opinion, may have gone wrong?

[Members of the group, please list your suggestions.]

There are many ways in which such mistakes can be avoided today. One of these is through the use of Handbooks.

[Discuss how the help provided can offset the particular problems listed.]

But we first have to learn how to use Handbooks. At the same time, Handbooks are not perfect, and often they should be revised and improved, just as translations need to be improved over the years. Therefore in our discussions you will learn how to use the Handbooks, and we hope you will learn how to suggest improvements in the Handbooks as well.

Look before you leap! Look at a Handbook before you leap into the work of translating the biblical book for which it was written.

Front matter

Note what is on every page at the beginning of the Handbook. For example, the list of *Helps for Translators* may remind you of certain books that you need for doing your work more effectively.

The Copyright Page:

- What information do you find? How will it be useful?

The Preface:

- Is there any information here that is useful for you to know about this Handbook, as compared with others you may have used?
- What information is the same as that in other Handbooks?

Abbreviations:

- Did you know this page existed?
- Why will you need such a list?

- How will you find what NEB means if you have forgotten the full name?
- Did you know that the various versions are mentioned in full only the first time they occur in the comments of the Handbook?
- Are there any abbreviations of biblical books that seem strange or unusual to you? Better take note of them so you'll recognize them when they appear.

Back matter

Appendix:

- Have you seen an Appendix in any other Handbook?
- When will you need to refer to this Appendix?

Bibliography:

- What can you learn about this Handbook when you look through the Bibliography?
- Do you recognize the basic texts used?
- Are any of the modern versions familiar to you?
- What other books do you recognize?
- Are there any that you would like to know better, or would like to use in your work as a translator? Do you know how these may become available, or where to find them in your part of the world?

Glossary:

- What words do you recognize but have never really understood?
- Are any of the definitions unclear and in need of revision? (Suggestions for improvement are always welcome!)
- How do you plan to use the Glossary as you work through the Handbook?

Index:

Find a word that makes you curious to know more about it. Look up the discussion.

- Are the comments helpful?
- Does the word occur elsewhere in this book of the Bible, but in a place where the Handbook has no discussion of the term?
- If you find a term not well explained in the Handbook, where will you go for help?

[*Suggestion to leader:* It will be far better to find a term occurring in the Index but in a location not indexed; in other words, no discussion of the term is found at that point, since the term is adequately discussed elsewhere, therefore this location is not in the index. It will then make sense to look up the term in the Index to find the discussion on it. For example, using *A Handbook on The Revelation to John*: Page 324, under 22.18, how do you wish to translate “the words of the prophecy of this book”?

- The information is not given here. Where can you find it?
- What is the difference between “prophecy” and “prophesy”?

- Does the Handbook have adequate information for you on this item?]

Illustrations and maps:

- How will these be useful as you translate?
- Can you suggest other illustrations that may help you translate more clearly?
[Perhaps this question will be more useful after the group has struggled with the translation.]

Main section

Introduction, "Translating ... ":

- From this section, what can you find out about the circumstances in which the book was written?
- Any information about the writer?
- What is the writer trying to accomplish?
- What kind of writing does the writer use (genre)?
- Do writers among your own people ever write in the same genre?
- If so, what features are the same, and what differences can you detect?
- As you look at the outline of the book, can you see what the author is trying to accomplish in each section?
- What problems do you think you may have as you translate this book?
- If a translator tries to translate this book without reading the introduction, what mistakes may appear?

Have you read this biblical book completely before attempting to translate it?

Working with the **discussion** text of the Handbook:

- As you translate this book, what other books and resources do you have available?
- As you work with this Handbook, note the books and resources you wish you had in order to produce a better translation.

Read carefully any description of the whole section you are about to translate, and read information about the section heading.

- What kinds of section headings will your people understand and find meaningful? Single-level or multiple-level? Complete clauses or brief phrases? Must a heading always take one form, never the other (always clauses or else always phrases)?
- What is the section heading supposed to do for your people, as they would understand it when they see it?
- Will your people think that the heading is part of the Bible itself, or will they understand it to be something added for helping them to understand the Bible?
- After looking at the section, can you suggest a better heading for your language than any given by the Handbook?

Now read through the discussion of the section:

- Are there any expressions that will be difficult to translate?
- Does the Handbook give you the help you need, or is the Handbook weak on this point?
- Are there any expressions you thought were easy to translate until you found out what they really intend to say?
- Do you think you have learned enough about the ancient text so that you can say it in your language?
- As you write, are you shaping the expressions as people would actually talk or write creatively in your language?
- Do the various translation suggestions help, or must you create something different?
- What questions do you still have? What new questions? Can you find the answers?

After translating the section, please return to the section heading and see if you still agree with what you wrote.

- Would it have been better to prepare a section heading after you translated the section?

Final comments

The above set of suggestions will seem rather simplistic to some, while for others it will be on too high a level. The material is set up merely to provide some ideas for development and application according to local needs.

One final request: It will be very helpful if at least some translators can develop the habit of taking notes on their impressions of any given Handbook. For those who attend training workshops it may help them to provide responses if they are given one or more sheets with the following written across the top:

“Please note page number, with chapter and verse, for any comments.

What information do you need that is not in the Handbook?

What information do you disagree with?

Are any words, sentences, or paragraphs unclear?”

If you can help us in this manner, we may be able to help you better. We'll keep on trying!

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

This article has been written by Raewyn J. Pattemore and Stephen W. Pattemore who have worked with the Urak Lawoi' people in South Thailand since 1984.

– Editor