

TECHNICAL PAPERS FOR
**THE BIBLE
TRANSLATOR**

*Published twice yearly
(January and July)
by the United
Bible Societies*
Vol. 42, No. 3, July 1991

EDITOR: Paul Ellingworth

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Jocelyn Murray

JOHN ELLINGTON

WIT AND HUMOR IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

The author is a UBS Translation Consultant based in Côte d' Ivoire

The subtleties of humor are usually the last elements of a language that students are able to grasp. The tendency is to read everything in a very literal, one-dimensional manner . . . Nevertheless, even in written form and in translation from Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, some examples do come through clearly.

Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter* (1987)

Introduction

Over the past three years I have asked dozens of people the following question: "In your opinion, which book of the Bible is the funniest?" As a rule, the only answer I get is a blank stare of disbelief. This is sometimes followed by a quizzical statement like, "Well, I had never thought of that before. . ." or a more stern, "The Bible was not meant to be funny." As Samuel Sandmel once said, "We invariably approach sacred writings with our sense of humor blocked out. We are ready for Scripture to make us ashamed, or to inspire us, or to make us weep – but not to make us laugh."¹

Yet the Bible is replete with examples of puns, irony, satire and a generally clever use of language that must have made the original readers and hearers smile or chuckle while at the same time causing them to stop and think seriously. But how much of this comes through in our translations? Humor is notoriously difficult to translate partly because it is so difficult for modern translators with limited training in the biblical languages to recognize, but also because many translators are reluctant to convey humor even after it has been pointed out to them. Bullard quotes Chotzner (1892) as saying that "translators, either through oversight or inability, have failed to reproduce [humor in the original Hebrew text]." But Bullard goes on to say: "He might well have added 'or through deliberate intention,' for is it not true that translators have preferred

¹ John Moore Bullard, *Biblical Humor: Its Nature and Function*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1961 quoting an unpublished manuscript, 48.

bowdlerization of candid passages of the biblical text, in the interest of making it a fit instrument for public worship, to a strict literal translation. Certainly the KJV, RV, ASV, RSV and NEB . . . lie open to this charge.”²

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the problem of translating wit and humor in Scripture in the hope of making translators more aware of this element in the Bible and sensitizing them to some solutions that they have perhaps not heretofore considered. But first it is important to discuss the various terms used in this context.

Definitions: can the terms be defined?

The word “humor” comes originally from the Latin for “moisture” and in ancient and medieval physiology the term was used to mean approximately what we refer to as “temperament” today. And the seventh and last definition of “humour” given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* has to do with that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous or the mental faculty for discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous. According to conventional wisdom, **Wit** relates to the power of evoking laughter by observations showing verbal facility or ingenuity and swift perception especially of the incongruous. **Irony** is generally understood as involving a manner of expression in which the intended meaning is the opposite of what is seemingly expressed. **Satire** concerns the use of language to expose or ridicule conduct, doctrines, or institutions either by direct criticism or more often through irony, parody, or caricature.

But ultimately all these terms are illusive. “There are always those who want terms defined, laboring under the assumption that the most complex issues can be pinned down by a few well-chosen phrases. Yet terms such as **humor, comedy, irony** and **satire** are not easily compressed and packaged in this way.”³ The one thing that seems to unite the various elements under discussion here appears to be the fact that they all belong to a cluster of concepts having to do with the clever use of language. They all seem to involve juxtaposing elements of language that are not normally put together and with the result that they are perceived as ingenious and imaginative — to a greater or lesser degree — by other speakers of the language.

Why is it that members of a certain culture laugh at the following lines by American comedienne Phyllis Diller: “When I go to the beauty shop, I always use the emergency entrance . . . Sometimes I just go in for an estimate.” It is because she has taken terminology related to the hospital (emergency entrance) and the automotive body repair shop (estimate) and put them together with the world of cosmetology.

Why do we smile when we hear the punch line of a joke based on the fact that the word “bank” in English may refer to a financial institution or to the embankment of a river? It is because the story-teller has unexpectedly brought together in the mind of the hearer the two meanings

² Bullard, 37. This was written before TEV appeared!

³ Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987, 7.

of the single word. Similarly, there is not much unusual or clever about the English sentence "The green worm veers toward the green glass." But the same sentence may be seen as clever in French because of the juxtaposition of so many homonyms and near homonyms: "Le ver vert vire vers le verre vert."

Thus, elements that are not usually put together or are originally seen as being incompatible or incongruous come together in a pun, the punch line of a joke or a witty statement. But this assumes a certain reservoir of shared information. Consider, for example, the following line from Heller's *Catch 22* which assumes a prior knowledge of a similar statement in the literature of the Western World: "Some men are born mediocre, some men achieve mediocrity and some men have mediocrity thrust upon them. With Major Major it had been all three." The humor of this passage may not be entirely lost on the reader who does not know the quotation from Shakespeare which was made more famous by Churchill's use of it during World War II. But the humor will almost certainly be diminished to a considerable degree if this background is unknown. The cleverness involves the bringing together of the concepts of mediocrity and greatness by using the form of a well known quotation but changing "greatness" to "mediocrity" and then adding the bonus sentence at the end.

For the purposes of this paper wit and humor may be defined as "linguistic play" or the "clever use of language" usually involving the juxtaposition of normally incongruous elements. If poetry can be defined, as Kugel has done, as something "lofty" or "elevated style,"⁴ then it should be possible to define wit and humor as something astute or the "clever use of language." Using this definition, of course, even the acrostic Psalms would have to be recognized as "wit/humor." And this may not be harmful since it is important "to set aside the common misconception that humor and the laughable are identical. All humor is not slapstick . . ."⁵ As Halford Luccock has observed, "Humor, like religion, has a way of cutting a pompous strutter down to size . . . Humor is a moral banana skin dedicated to the discomfiture of all who take themselves too solemnly."⁶ It may, therefore, serve a very serious purpose.

Translatability: are wit and humor translatable?

Peter Newmark states unequivocally that "nothing is untranslatable" and more specifically that "all jokes are translatable." He qualifies this, however, by adding, "but they do not always have the same impact."⁷ The assertion that there is no such thing as untranslatability is made as a conscious and pointed contrast with Catford, who concludes his *Linguistic Theory of Translation* with a chapter on "The Limits of Translatability." But in all fairness to Catford, it should be noted that he does not

4 Or more precisely "a complex of heightening effects used in combinations and intensities that vary widely from composition to composition even within a single 'genre.'" (New Haven: Yale University Press 1981, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 94).

5 Bullard, 29.

6 Halford Luccock, in *Christian Century*, Feb 17, 1960, 207. Quoted in Bullard, 16.

7 Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981) 107, 109.

categorically deny the possibility of translation. In fact, he introduces his final chapter by saying that “SL texts, and items are *more* or *less* translatable rather than absolutely *translatable* or *untranslatable*.”⁸ One wonders whether Newmark’s optimism about translating jokes is not at least partly due to the fact that he seems to limit himself almost exclusively to translation between European languages (mostly English, French and German). A serious attempt at translating word play in Hanunóo,⁹ Hebrew puns or even simple English limericks¹⁰ might change his perspective a bit. It is simply not true that “all jokes are translatable.” The words may be translatable, but the joke often remains hopelessly obscure to the reader or hearer of the so-called ‘translation’.

The answer to the question of whether or not linguistic play is translatable cannot, therefore, be an unequivocal yes or no. There are cases where it may be rendered with something like equivalent effect in the target language, but there are many more cases where this is simply not possible. In these cases, recourse to explanatory footnotes is about the only arm left in the translator’s arsenal.

Levels of Linguistic Play

There seem to be several different levels of “linguistic play” and it appears that the degree of translatability is directly related to the level of linguistic play involved in the wit or humor. There will certainly be other ways of categorizing the various kinds of clever use of language, but the following classification may be helpful. Linguistic play may be divided into three basic categories: (1) phonological or phonotactical play; (2) morpho-syntactic play; and (3) rhetorical play. And each of these may be further sub-divided into those types of play involving either association or modification. That is, there may be some kind of association of sounds, words or ideas in their purer form or there may be some modification or distortion of the sounds, words or ideas as they are used in linguistic play. According to Freud, “the slighter the modification the better will be the joke.”¹¹

The following grid summarizes the proposed categorization; although it is not intended to be exhaustive.

8 J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965, 93.

9 See Harold C. Conklin, “Linguistic Play in Its Cultural Context” in Dell Hymes (ed.), *Language in Culture and Society*. New York: Harper and Row 1964, 295-300.

10 Newmark would be hard pressed to translate even into French or German the ‘joke’ contained in a harmless limerick like the following:

A fly and a flea in a flue
Were imprisoned, so what could they do?
Said the fly, “Let us flee!”
“Let us fly!” said the flea.
So they flew through a flaw in the flue.

11 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: W. S. Norton, 1960, 25.

	Association	Modification
Phonotactical [sounds]	pure plays on words rhyme	puns
Morpho-syntactical [words]	double entendre ambiguity	word division blends
Rhetorical [ideas]	irony	hyperbole meiosis/litotes caricature/parody satire

Phonotactical — Playing with Sounds

The first type of linguistic play involves those situations where the writer (or speaker) plays with the actual sounds of the words involved. While sound may be more important in spoken communication than in the written word, Caird (1980) reminds us that “unvoiced reading is comparatively modern and that ancient authors wrote for reading aloud.”¹²

Pure plays on words: In the seventh chapter of 2 Samuel there is a play on the two different meanings of the word *beth* which may be used for “temple” or for a “family” or “dynasty.” In verse 5-7, YHWH asks whether it is David who will build a *beth* [house = temple] for him. But at the end of verse 11 YHWH indicates that he will establish a *beth* [royal dynasty] for David. The translation of TEV, using the words “temple” and “descendants” accurately conveys the meaning, but fails to translate the play on words that would have been so clear to the original readers.

A very similar play on words is found in the early verses of Hebrews 3 where the Greek word for “house,” *oikos*, is used in the sense of “household” referring first to the people of Israel and later to the people of God in general under the New Covenant. But the illustration used by the writer has to do with the construction of a literal dwelling.

Puns: Freud, quoting Fischer (1889), but not with approval, states that “a pun is a bad play on words, since it plays upon the word not as a word but as a sound.” That is, there is some kind of twisting or modification of the sound involved. There are numerous instances of this type of wit in Scripture.

In Isaiah 5.7 the association of two pairs of words that are very similar in sound but vastly different in meaning must have had a better effect on the hearers than the bland rendering of most English versions have on us today.

12 G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. London: Duckworth, 1980, 46.

“He looked for *mishpāt* [justice],
 but lo, *mishpāh* [oppression];
 for *sedāqāh* [righteousness],
 but lo, *se’āqāh* [distress].

The *German Common Language* (DGN) translation of 1982 succeeds in finding a similar pair for the first two words with *Rechtsspruch* [judgment or right speaking] and *Rechtsbruch* [rights-breaking]. But the translators of this version were apparently unable to come up with a similar match for the second pair. The significance of the basket of summer fruit [*gāyits*] in Amos 8.1-2 is not fully understood unless one knows that the word for “end” [*gets*] that begins the message of YHWH in 2b is very similar in sound. TEV conveys this information in a footnote, but NIV attempts to show the similarity in the text by speaking of “a basket of ripe fruit” and following it by having YHWH say “the time is ripe. . .” FC likewise plays on the same word, “mur/mûr” in French. And TOB makes a similar attempt by speaking of “a basket of fruit of the end of summer” [“une corbeille de fruits de fin d’ été”] followed by “the end has come. . .” [“la fin est arrivée. . .”].

These examples of more or less successful translation of puns given above are unusual. A translator may get lucky once in a while and be able to provide his or her reader with a rough approximation of a pun in the original languages of Scripture, but this is the exception rather than the rule. More often when a feeble attempt is made, it involves some kind of violation of naturalness in the target language. For example, the almond tree [*shāqed*] in Jer 1.11 is less meaningful if one ignores the fact that the word for “keeping watch” in YHWH’s response is *shoqed*. Moffatt attempts to highlight this correspondence with “the shoot of a wake-tree” followed by the statement “. . . I am wakeful over my word.” And DGN does something similar. But native speakers of English search in vain in ordinary dictionaries to find out what a “wake-tree” is. And is there really such a thing as a *Wacholderzweig* in German?

Another example of slightly stretching the rules of the receptor language is seen in the way Moffatt renders Genesis 2.23b:

“this shall be called Wo-man, for from man was she taken.”

He thus violates normal English usage by hyphenating the word for woman in order to try to highlight the symbolic play on words in Hebrew which uses the similarity between *’ish* and *’ishā*.

But the solution in the vast majority of cases of playing with sounds is either to ignore them altogether or to relegate the information to a footnote. And, as we shall see in more detail later, the footnote solution may be about the best that can be expected in most cases.

Rhyme. Another form of playing with sounds is the repetition of sounds, which we might call rhyme. This does not occur in Greek, but is

found to some degree in Hebrew.¹³ One example of this is in Song of Songs 2.15 where the plural ending *-im* is repeated five times in succession. But in a language like English, where plural forms vary and are less distinct, it would be impossible to reproduce an equivalent effect. And in Bantu languages where plural markers come at the beginning of nouns rather than at the end, it is likewise impossible.

Another example of “rhyme” is found in the Samson story in the song in praise of the god Dagon (Judges 16.24). In this case the rhyme is based on the fourfold repetition of the pronominal form *-enu* meaning “our” or “us.” Moffatt’s attempt to get rhyme into his rendering of this verse is based on a totally different phenomenon, using the nouns “hands. . . lands. . . bands.” But as de Waard and Nida point out, the consequence is “an English jingle [which] results in a serious loss of dignity.”¹⁴ On the other hand, a language like Lingala could relatively easily reproduce the form of the Hebrew repetition in natural language. The following proposition from a non-native speaker of the language is an example of what might be done:

Nzambe akangi monguna na biso;
Apesi ye na maboko na biso.
Ye moto abebisaki mboka na biso,
Ye wana azalaki konyokola biso.

Morpho-syntactic— Playing with Words

The second major type of wit and humor or linguistic play in the Bible and in language in general is morpho-syntactic. These are cases where the writer uses the actual words of the language (rather than its sounds) in a clever way.

I will never forget an experience while studying French that taught me how difficult it is to translate humor. My tutor had asked me to tell her a joke in French and I set out to do so. But the punch line of the story was based on common word “legs” which may be used in English for humans, animals or insects. But since French distinguishes very carefully between “jambes” (the lower extremities of human beings or the legs of horses) and “pattes” (the legs of insects and animals other than horses), the joke was on me because the story was not at all funny when I finally reached the punch line.

Polysemy or double entendre apparently occurs in all languages. But there is rarely a one to one correspondence between the elements with double meaning in any two languages. One of the techniques of the Gospel of John is to use terms that may be understood in more than one way and then show how the hearer has misunderstood the term in the first instance (for example, 4.11; 8.22; 11.13 and 13.36-38). The best known example

¹³ Jan de Waard and Eugene Nida, *From One Language to Another*. New York: Nelson 1986, 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 89.

of double entendre is in Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in Jn 3.3 where the nocturnal inquirer is told that he must be born *anōthen*. As is well known, this may mean either "over again" (NIV, TEV, NEB) or "from on high/above" (NJB, NAB, Moffatt, TOB). Newmark¹⁵ indicates that, faced with double meaning in a single lexical item, the translator may possibly reproduce it in the target language with a term having the same two meanings. But given the scant likelihood of this in most cases, he allows for two other alternatives: (a) distribute the two senses of the lexical unit over two or more lexical units or (b) sacrifice one of the two meanings. Goodspeed opts for the first of these two alternatives in the case of John 3.3 and tries to convey the double meaning of the term with the expression "born over again from above." But most other versions are content to sacrifice one of the meanings or to offer it in a footnote.

In the Old Testament there may be a number of cases which we now consider textual problems but which may have been originally cases of double entendre, whether intentional or unintentional. The meaning of the Hebrew consonants *mqwmh* in Nahum 1.8 may be either "its place" referring to Nineveh, or "those who rebel." The MT adopts the first of these and is followed by a majority of modern versions. However, some recent translations adopt the reading of the Greek Septuagint and translate "adversaries" (AT) or "enemies" (REB) or "those who defy him" (NJB). But who can say with certainty that the original writer did not intentionally use a word that could be understood in two different ways? It was apparently only after the vocalization of the Masoretes that this became a textual problem.

Similarly, the words in Jeremiah 17.13 that are almost invariably translated "hope of Israel" — without even a footnote — could possibly have a different meaning. De Waard and Nida, citing Dahood, state that "there exists a homonym *miqweh* with the meaning 'pool,' and the figurative use of the homonym could have been intended here with the meaning 'The Lord is the pool of Israel.' This seems to be justified since at the end of the same verse. . . , the Lord is identified with 'the fountain of living water.'" ¹⁶ But is it not possible that the author or editor wanted his readers/hearers to think of both "hope" and "pool" when he wrote these words?

It has been postulated that the use of the proper names meaning "weaking" [Mahlon] and "sickly" or possibly even "annihilation" [Chilion] for the sons of Naomi and Elimelek in the book of Ruth constitutes a kind of intentional playing with words by the writer. Even the name Orpha, which may possibly mean "one who turns back," may be seen in this light. But because this hypotheses is tenuous, it is better to convey this information in footnotes rather than in the text itself.

We should also consider here all those etymological passages where the writer is at pains to show his reader why a given place is called by a

¹⁵ Newmark, 108.

¹⁶ de Waard and Nida, 107.

certain name. The relationship between the context and the name is totally missing in those versions which simply transliterate the name. But the passage is well translated when the proper name is rendered using the same terminology as the contextual statement giving the reason for the name. This is true even if folk etymology is involved.

In Joshua 7.24-26, for example, those versions which transliterate "Valley of Achor" (RSV, NEB, NIV) obscure the relationship between the context and the name. Where an explanatory footnote is given, the reader is still required to make an unnecessary effort to see the connection. Even those versions which put the meaning of Achor in brackets following the transliteration (such as Goodspeed) or present the transliteration parenthetically after the translation (such as Moffatt) require an extra step in the thinking of the reader. On the other hand, those versions which directly translate the meaning of the name in terms of the context enable the reader to see immediately the correlation between name and event.

"Said Joshua, 'Why have you devastated us? Yahweh will devastate you this very day.' . . . Therefore the name of that place is called Devastation Valley, down to this day."¹⁷

Word division: The problem of word division or word fusion in the Bible are well known, but we almost always think of them in terms of textual variants. Nevertheless, we should ask whether there are cases in which the biblical writers intentionally used forms that could be divided ambiguously or where they intentionally fabricated forms based on similarities with other words or phrases?

A great deal of the humorous verse of Ogden Nash is based on this type of twisting or joining of words in order to make them rhyme with legitimate English words, as in "The Asp":

Whenever I behold an asp
I can't suppress a startled gasp.
I do not charge the asp with matricide,
But what about his Cleopatricide?

Similarly word blends such as "alcoholidays" and "anecdottage" fall into this same category. And the infamous Spooner, as well as those who built on his foundation, intentionally or unintentionally twisted words in this way: "You have hissed my mystery lecture; you have tasted the whole worm. . ."

Is there any evidence of this kind of thing in Scripture? Possibly. The name "Gershom" is perhaps based on a fusion of two Hebrew words, *ger sham*, meaning "an alien there." But others suggest that the root is rather the verb *garash*, "to drive away." Many other proper names could be seen in this light. For example, Daniel as "God is my judge" or Ezekiel as

¹⁷ Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua (The Anchor Bible)*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1982, 218.

“God strengthens” or Joshua as “God saves/is gracious.” But apart from proper names, I have no examples of this sort of thing.

Rhetorical — Playing with Ideas

The third major area of linguistic play has to do with playing with ideas or concepts. On the level of association, this involves irony where meaning is not ostensibly twisted and on the level of modification it would include hyperbole, meiosis, litotes, caricature, satire and parody where meaning is obviously twisted.

While it may be argued that all cases on this level involve modification, irony at least may be seen as a simple association of ideas. Ronald Knox states that “Irony is content to describe men exactly as they are, to accept them professedly, at their own valuation, and then to laugh up its sleeve. . .”¹⁸

Irony may therefore, be defined as the statement of one thing with the intention of suggesting something else. 2 Sam 6.20 borders on sarcasm when Michal, disgusted with David’s behavior, says “How the king of Israel has honored himself today. . .” but the immediate context makes the ironic use of the word “honor” in this statement abundantly clear.

In 2 Cor 12.13 Paul requests forgiveness, but clearly with tongue in cheek, after having said “I have never been a burden to you.” Obviously one does not ordinarily ask forgiveness for not having been a burden to others. But Paul does so to make a point.

Devices involving modification are much more common on this level than simple association. Virtually all types of clever use of language on this level involve some kind of distortion. When a writer uses understatement (meiosis or litotes), he says less than he means. When one uses overstatement (hyperbole) one says more than one really means. Caricature and satire likewise involve distorting the facts.

Satire — a satire is a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule and scorn. A very good case can be made for the fact that the story of Jonah is satire. Others have suggested that the book of Daniel is also satirical: Chapter 1 may be seen as a satire of the wisdom of the Babylonians. Chapter 2 derides the experts (fortunetellers, magicians, sorcerers and wizards) in their stalling for time and their inability to interpret the king’s dream. Chapter 3 scorns the punishment for those who refuse to worship the golden statue. Chapter 4 portrays a great monarch literally as a fool. Each chapter, in fact, has characteristics of satire. Similar observations may be made for each of the twelve chapters of the book.¹⁹

The ridicule of the social elite of Samaria found in the metaphorical statement “Hear this you cows of Bashan. . .” (Amos 4.1) is translated in TEV as “Listen to this, you women of Samaria, who grow fat like the cows of Bashan. . .” This brings out more clearly the relationship between

18 G. A. Buttrick (ed.), *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 2. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962, 726.

19 See Bullard, 166-171.

the women and the overtly mentioned cows. But it may not be necessary in some languages to be this explicit.

Overstatement (hyperbole) is frequently used to make a point in the Bible. For example, the use of the verb “hate” in contrast with “love” to mean simply “love less. . .” as in Gen 29.31; Lk 14.26; Mt 6.24; Jn 12.25. Similarly the use of the “mote” and the “beam” (Mt 7) and straining at a gnat to swallow a camel (Mt 23) are well known examples of hyperbole in the teaching of Jesus.

Writers also speak of ‘prophetic hyperbole’ where the prophet intentionally overstates his case to make a point. It has been suggested that the use of *tohu wabohu* (Jer 4.23), which is found elsewhere only in the chaos out of which the world was created (Gen 1.2; cf Isa 34.11), is an exaggeration pointing out the cosmic proportions resulting from God’s judgment on Israel.

Understatement (meiosis): This device is quite rare in the OT. Possibly the only possible example of understatement in the OT is in Genesis 18.4-5 where “a drop of water” and “a morsel of bread” may be taken as the self-depreciation of a gracious host. In the NT it is more common. It is, for example, clearly an understatement when Paul says “I am not ashamed of the Gospel” (Rom 1.16).

Litotes is a special type of meiosis where the understatement is made through the use of the negation of the contrary. A frequently cited example is in Acts 21.39 where Tarsus is described as “no mean city.” Less frequently cited is Rom 10.16 where Paul’s words “not all have obeyed the Gospel” is likewise an understatement.

Caricature — The technique of exaggeration by means of which the ludicrous distortion of characteristics is sometimes used to make a point in the Bible. Much of the book of Jonah can be seen in this light.

All these types of linguistic play are usually relatively easy to translate, but it is open to question whether or not the reader/hearer will recognize it for what it is. How many readers, for example, recognize hyperbole in Jonah? or the whole book as a satire or caricature? Aside from the whale episode, consider these possible hyperboles:

(a) Jonah 3.3: The size of the city of Nineveh may be a hyperbole. The excavation of the city reveals a large city with an area of 1800 acres or 7284 hectares, but even a city of this size would hardly take three days to walk through. It is possible that “the great city” was meant to describe a whole complex of cities stretching as far as Calah, 29 kms to the south,²⁰ but it is also possible that the writer was simply exaggerating to make a point.

(b) Jonah 3.4: The reluctant prophet offers a one line sermon (five words in Hebrew) that immediately converts a whole city. Is this to be taken literally, or is the writer poking fun at the would-be prophet?

(c) Jonah 3.7: This verse describes the fasting and wearing of sackcloth

²⁰ John D. W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (The Cambridge Bible Commentary). New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975, 76.

by the animals as a result of the king's decree. Surely the original readers and hearers of this story found it amusing to contemplate the animals of Nineveh decked out in mourning clothing normally worn only by human beings.

And the ironic disproportion between Jonah's concern for the ephemeral plant and his lack of concern for the people of Nineveh at the end of this book (4.5-11) is apparently the point of the whole story. Although the Jonah story may or may not be "the funniest book in the Bible," it certainly uses the devices of wit and humor more than most biblical literature.

Mixed levels: the Case of Judges 3

For purposes of discussion it is useful to try to categorize the different levels and types of linguistic play. But as we have already noticed, in actual usage these levels and types are often combined and blended so that they are not easy to separate. A good example of this is Judges 3.

The Anchor Bible mentions the "obvious narrative humor"²¹ of the story of Ehud and Eglon. And Robert Alter likewise speaks of "a touch of scatological humor"²² with reference to the chamber pot in this story of the assassination of Eglon, King of Moab. The general situational humor may be reproduced in any language where that type of situation can legitimately be perceived as humorous. However, the reinforcement of the humor of the situation by means of the "two punning verbal clues"²³ can rarely if ever be reproduced in the target language. The word for "dagger," *tq'* (vs 16), and the word for "ram's horn," *tq'* (vs 27), are the same in the Hebrew. Likewise, the adjective which describes the "lustful" or "strong," *shamen*, men killed in verse 29 is the same as the word for "fat" in verse 22 so that a parallel is drawn between the assassination of Eglon and the massacre of the 10,000 Moabites who followed him. These details fall into the category of phonologically based word-play and are therefore very difficult to translate naturally into other languages. In fact, many translators in the Africa Region have undoubtedly translated this story from secondary sources without even the faintest notion that these "punning verbal clues" exist.

CONCLUSION

It has hopefully been demonstrated that the different levels of linguistic play involve different degrees of translatability. The phonotactical level is probably the most difficult to reproduce in any target language. The morpho-syntactic level is still difficult but less so than the phonotactical. The rhetorical level is the easiest of the three to render into another language. But even on this level there are numerous examples where the reader/hearer of the target language will probably not "catch on" even though the linguistic play has been translated. It should also be noted

21 Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (The Anchor Bible). Garden City: Doubleday, 1975, 85.

22 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, 1981, 40.

23 Alter, 41.

that those forms of linguistic play on the “modification” side of the ledger are far more difficult to translate than those involving only “association.” Because of the difficulty and in some cases downright impossibility, it will often be necessary to provide further elucidation to the reader in footnotes.

Translation consultants generally agree that they must help translators to give the modern reader/hearer something of the flavor of the original and that this is a reasonable and attainable goal. But the present analysis of linguistic play seems to call this into question in certain cases. Even on the simplest level and under the best of circumstances, wit and humor push the limits of translatability and will need to be illuminated in carefully worded footnotes. Yet it is common knowledge that any joke that has to be explained loses a great deal of its punch. Newmark, in fact, suggests that the aim of “equivalent effect” is unrealistic when dealing with such material.²⁴ So when it comes to translating wit and humor, in most cases it may be more sensible to admit defeat and cut our losses by focusing on the creation of helpful and meaningful footnotes to explain how the original readers might have understood the text. Once in a great while there may be exceptional cases where translators can come up with target language renderings that accurately reflect the wit and humor of the originals. But, in fact, the only clear conclusion from this study is the confirmation of the relatively recent UBS decision concerning the absolute necessity of non-doctrinal notes in order to make our translations meaningful and fully understandable.

24 Newmark, 105.