

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING?

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What does the explosion in current language translation mean? I am not satisfied with the now "current" answer: "We provide a common language translation for the use of all native speakers. It is up to the churches to decide whether they will use it in worship or whether they prefer to go on using traditional translations of the formal equivalence type." I feel this is an easy way out of the problems raised by the work of the Bible Societies. It might be wise for the translators to think over what they are doing in a more historical perspective in order to meet the criticisms and the praise with which they will increasingly be confronted.

1. What Dynamic Translations Have Done in the Past

David Barrett, in his study on "Schism and Renewal in Africa"¹ suggests that as soon as the "whole Bible" is translated in an African language, deep ecclesiastical changes occur in the tribes that use it. He finds that the publication of a vernacular Bible is the highest "Correlate of independency", which means that the translation of Scriptures is the preeminent cause of separatism in Africa. The moment one recognizes that the "new churches" in Africa are often more alive and dynamic than the old ones, one has to accept the fact that Bible translation has been a factor for renewal.

These translations, however, rarely follow the principles of dynamic equivalence, and one might think that the work of the pioneers in Africa has little to do with the modern linguistic and anthropological approach to translation. This is a misunderstanding which should be dispelled. Today, men like Bratcher, Wonderly and Margot are really doing for European languages what the traditional translators did fifty years ago in the African bush. When I learned the first rudiments of translation in reading Nida's *Bible Translation*, I was given innumerable examples of how "not to do it" from English and French versions. His books are, however, studded with examples of how one has done it in non-European languages. In translating across culture, it seems therefore that missionaries have stumbled on methods which their own theological teachers ignored. They took the culture of their new readers seriously, whereas European theologians continued to translate for people who had learned the church language, without attempting to learn the language of the unchurched. It has sometimes been argued that the reason why biblical texts were best sellers in the third world whilst they were difficult to distribute in other places was due to the fact that "new readers were eager readers". The TEV experience proves that even old readers are eager when they understand the biblical message.

Are then David Barrett's suggestions relevant to the situation in Europe and the United States? Though it is still too early to claim this, I would

¹ Oxford University Press, 1968.

invite Bible Society colleagues to consider that it is possible, and even to recognize in certain developments a sign of the times.

2. Dynamic Equivalent Interpretation

The coincidence of the new translation with the present Christian renewal is curious. Some see in it a causal relationship. I would rather suggest that we look at it as two parallel events. We should, however, note that as distribution figures of new translations soar, tremendous interest in the Bible is elicited and a completely new trend in Bible interpretation comes into being.

It seems that the publication of a translation according to the principles of dynamic equivalence does not simply give easy access to the biblical texts. It reveals to the reader (or the listener) the fact that these stories belong to another historical time and culture. Formal equivalent translations are not only difficult to understand, they communicate that there might be a heavenly language and a heavenly culture; they encourage the reader to adapt himself to this “divine mode of being and thinking” and tempt him to an otherworldliness which has, for many evangelists, become the core of the message. The moment one realizes, through the help of good translations, that Jesus and Jeremiah, Job and Paul, were not angels but historical figures having to grapple with the same problems of communication as any modern preacher, another attitude becomes possible. The discovery of the “strangeness of the Gospel” gives impetus to dynamic interpretation. Thus men and women, and specially many young people, are no longer content to tell the story of Jesus in modern translations: they want to retell it their own way, using the TEV as a trampoline, as a basis, to apply the original message to their own cultural situation, using the media of communication that our generation uses for its daily information.

This new approach is daily bread in the new African and Asian churches where the Gospel stories are retold and re-enacted in the social media of communication, using dynamic equivalent interpretation methods. It is still revolutionary in Europe, where it is often left to marginal groups and to the pop musical. What after all are “Godspell”, “Jesus Christ Superstar”, and the many Christian “happenings” staged in many places (mostly outside the church), if not attempts at “transculturating” the biblical text into our own media? What the Reformers and Wesley did when they interpreted biblical passages for their generation is taking place around us, if only we have eyes to see it.

But the specialists of dynamic equivalent translation are not only providing impetus and inspiration. They have discovered the methods which will renew Bible interpretation, in modern times. Looking for the reaction a particular author wanted to elicit in his readers paves the way for sound interpretation. When the translator faithfully expresses the desire of the author, he gives a lead to the interpreter who wants to express the same thought in our present cultural situation. The analysis of the original communication situation is an essential task of the linguist, and it allows the teacher to get across the content of a message in a new adequate container. Thus our textbooks on translation should not be confined to readers of *The Bible Translator*, but should be used by all Christian communicators.

If we remain unaware of the gift we have received, we are like a man who hides his billfold in a numbered account in a Swiss bank, not even expecting any interest. . . . It is not sufficient to "hand over" our translations to the churches, we must teach our methods to the many pastors and evangelists who seem bogged down in traditional ways.

3. The Future of Current Language Translations

Church history, from Jerome through Luther to the African independent churches, seems to show that biblical translation can have unforeseeable effects on established ecclesiastical institutions. We live in a period when all authorities are questioned and when the hierarchical concept of society is being discarded. The Authorized Version was accepted in Britain after a great number of different translations had shaken the English Church. Luther's translation gained immediate success. In all European countries, making the biblical message accessible has meant schism and reformation, though the Christians, at the time, were not aware of it. We live in a period when pluralism is being rediscovered, and false unity is not going to be imposed on believers in 1975. But we must be aware that church structures are in deep mutation and that Bible Societies have a significant role to play in this transformation. We cannot refuse it, any more than the accusation of fostering dissension ever stopped Bible translators from working in Africa.

But renewal in the church has always led to new liturgies and new patterns of worship. It seems unrealistic to imagine that "churches will be free to decide whether they prefer to go on using traditional translations of the formal equivalence type". Christians, revived through their new understanding of Scripture, will increasingly ask the churches to change their pious and traditional language, and Bible Societies will have to make choices. Questions of copyright are already on the agenda of some of our meetings. We are facing criticisms which force us to take certain stands. If we want to be faithful to our call and serve all churches, including marginal communities, we need to know what is happening around us.

It is important that all translators should be aware of these developments, for the wise man who wants to build a Bible House begins by counting the cost and discovers that he has no money for that, but that he has the know-how to participate in the building of tomorrow's church.