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FORM AND MEANING IN TRANSLATION

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Introduction

All who have seriously studied Bible translations have been aware of the fact that many of the older translations erred in their unswerving loyalty to form, i.e. when the Greek used only one word *sarcs* "flesh" in a variety of contexts, they used only one word in the English in all those contexts, even if by using only one word in English—where at least five or six different expressions would be required to convey the meaning of *sarcs* accurately in its various contexts—they had to deny the modern reader a major portion of the meaning of the Biblical message. On the other hand, from time to time, modern translators are so anxious to create an effect similar to that of the original that both the form and the content of the Biblical message are often distorted in the process. This article suggests some ways to safeguard both the form and the meaning of the Scriptural message in translation.

This article proposes to summarize and to illustrate the basic principles and procedures for handling source language form in translation.^{1,2} Most of these principles have at one time or other been individually developed in various articles published in TBT³ over the years, and the present contribution is that they are here being restated systematically in one place. The reasons for preparing such a summary are several:

(1) Many people have expressed a deeply felt fear that the principles of dynamic translation encourage inadequate regard for the Word of God—especially in its source language form. In a number of translators' institutes where the author has presented the contents of this paper in a lecture, a substantial portion of participants seemed to sigh with relief when the material was presented—"Finally we are seeing some limits and some controls for adjusting the source language form in translation."

(2) For more than a decade now the Bible Societies have been teaching the concepts of dynamic equivalent translation, and in some cases translators have been producing not merely dynamic equivalent translations, but

¹ Among the sources that treat these concerns see: Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures involved in Bible Translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964, pp. 156-251; Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill for United Bible Societies, 1969, pp. 12-32, 56-119; William L. Wonderly, *Bible Translating for Popular Use*. London: United Bible Societies (Helps for Translators, Vol. VII), 1968, pp. 96-128; John Beekman, ed. (with Mildred L. Larson), *Notes on Translation with Drills*. Santa Ana: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1965, pp. 83-123, 177-223, 315ff.; John Beekman, "Lexical Equivalence involving Consideration of Form and Function," *Notes on Translation*, No. 14, March 1965, 19 pp.; Ronald D. Olson, "Lexical Equivalence and Semantic Components," *Notes on Translation*, No. 29, January 1968, pp. 15-20.

² Non-literal or figurative meanings have been largely excluded from this paper. They are to be treated in a series of papers to be published later.

³ Cf. *The Bible Translator*, 1:25-29, 72-74, 91-96; 2:56-66; 3:171; 5:44; etc., etc.

actually cultural equivalent translations. The result is a situation in which missionaries, anxious to get the real message across to tribal societies, are preparing translations which treat the historico-cultural setting of the Bible as irrelevant and which recast the Biblical message into the cultural framework of a contemporary aboriginal society.

(3) Finally, a number of coordinators in major translation programs have expressed the need for more explicit criteria by which to measure and to weigh the suggestions made by readers and the members of their review committees.

Types of Form and Meaning Correspondence between the Source Language and Receptor Languages

There are four basic types of correspondence or lack of correspondence possible between the source language form and meaning and the receptor language form and meaning.

(1) *The source language form and meaning correspond to the receptor language form and meaning*, e.g. Greek *kardia* which functions as the “seat of emotions” is largely equivalent to *heart* in English, *Herz* in German, *corazón* in Spanish, etc. This means that in most contexts the same English, German or Spanish word can be used to translate both the form and the meaning of Greek *kardia*.

The correspondence between languages, however, is usually not absolute because:

(1a) *The receptor language may add components which are not present in the original* and which therefore must be specifically denied in the receptor language translation, e.g. Greek *pneuma* “spirit” (Mark 1:12) here without any qualifier refers to *Holy Spirit*, but in most Amerindian languages *spirit* in its unmarked form usually indicates an “evil spirit” while in the Biblical usage the unmarked *spirit* indicates the “Holy Spirit”. The Bible marks the meaning of *spirit* as “evil spirit” specifically with the words *unclean*, *evil*, etc., or by the general context in which the word occurs. In Amerindian languages the cited passage in a literal translation “And the spirit drove him into the wilderness” would usually be understood as involving an evil spirit as the active agent in transporting Jesus. This grows, first of all, out of the fact that the unmarked word *spirit* refers to an “evil spirit”, and secondly, in this context this interpretation is reinforced by the presence of the verb *drove* which is much more compatible with *evil spirit* than *Holy Spirit* in aboriginal thinking. In many Bantu languages of Africa, however, the unmarked word *spirit* refers to an “ancestral spirit”. All this means that translations in Amerindian or African languages will have clearly to mark with *Holy* or *of God* all the unmarked occurrences of *spirit* in the New Testament which refer to the Holy Spirit.

(1b) *The receptor language lacks a component that is present in the source language* and which must be specifically added if the full meaning of the word is to be understood, e.g. the English word *to believe* lacks the component of *commitment* or *obedience* in its ordinary, contemporary usage. Therefore, especially in the letters of Paul and James, if *believe* is used without

this additional component the modern English reader is denied a major part of the source language meaning of that word.

(2) *The source language form is present in the receptor language but it carries a different meaning.* This may vary from a partial mismatch already cited in (1a) and (1b) to a more or less complete contradiction, e.g. the Shipibo in Peru use the expression *hard heart*, but to them it means not “stubborn” but “brave”. Again, the Lengua of Paraguay speak about *shouting from the housetops*, but to them it does not mean “a public announcement” but rather “an omen announcing an evil spirit attack upon the village”. The *public announcement* is expressed with a different form to *announce in front of the house*.

(3) *A different form in the receptor language carries the same meaning as the source language form, e.g. to have no holes in one's ears* in Shipibo is equivalent to the English *hard heart*. The Choco of Colombia express the same idea by *stiff thinking*, and the Lengua say *his innermost is deaf*. Again, the Greek *kardia* as “seat of the emotions” is expressed by *innermost* in Lengua, *spleen* in Waunana of Colombia, *intestines* in the Ayoreo of Bolivia and Paraguay, and *liver* in Chinantec of Mexico.

(4) *Both the source language form and meaning are strange or unknown in the receptor language, e.g. many smaller jungle tribes in the Americas who have little formal government find the idea of sitting on a throne to show leadership as very strange, if not meaningless.* Again, for the Waunana there is no difference in value between the right hand and left hand. In fact, the whole idea that one position in relationship to another person marks higher rank is quite foreign to them. On the left, right, in front, or behind, are all equal in value—as long as the person is not sitting on top of the other.

Misrepresenting the Biblical Form

Where there is correspondence of both form and meaning between the source language and the target language, translation is of course easy because one equivalent form expresses both the form and the meaning. The translation problem arises in (2), (3), and (4) where this correspondence is absent. How can one show respect for the Biblical form when its literal rendering does not convey the proper meaning in the receptor language? This author has established for himself as a rule the following principle: *The translation should not misrepresent the Biblical form, e.g. when J. B. Phillips renders “greet each other with a holy kiss” (I Cor. 16:20, AV) as “a hearty Christian handshake all around” he has obviously used a culturally equivalent form; and Phillips has done so by replacing the Biblical kissing form with the different, but culturally accepted, handshaking form.* In other words, in this case the source language form is present in English usage, but it carries not only a very different meaning, but may carry a meaning to be avoided. By our guidelines, however, J. B. Phillips' translation is still not a good one—for all its good intent—because it misrepresents the cultural form of the Biblical setting.

We can thus readily see that a most difficult situation arises in those cases where the Biblical form is present in a receptor language, but with a meaning

that is opposite to that expressed in the Scriptural source language. For example, in part of West Africa *putting branches on the road* is a traditional way of insulting a visiting dignitary who is disliked. In such situations, therefore, to describe Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with *putting branches on the road* expresses not the joyous welcome of the Biblical scene, but an insult. These people would express the joyous welcome by sweeping the road in front of the dignitary. In this case, of course, we are not dealing with a language problem, but a culturally significant act that has different meanings in different cultures. In such cases it may be best to put the intended meaning of the Bible in the text, but to preserve the actual Biblical event in a footnote explaining the cultural discrepancy.

Having maintained the principle that one must represent the Biblical form, we nevertheless recognize—and the above examples have already illustrated—that because the source language form and meaning do not always correspond to the receptor language form and meaning, certain types of adjustment are necessary. In fact, as the preceding paragraph shows, it may sometimes even be necessary to use a form that departs radically from the Biblical form.

Furthermore, we recognize that even in the Biblical message form is not of equal importance in all contexts. For this reason it becomes important that we be able to weigh the form in each context in order to determine its specific value, because the knowledge of the value of the form will indicate to us how much effort we ought to expend to preserve it.

Measuring the Importance of Source Language Form

There are at least three questions that have been helpful to this author in establishing the relative importance of Biblical form.

(1) *Does the Biblical form express an historical fact or does it function as a teaching device?* If it is history, we must try to preserve the form. If it is a teaching device, e.g. a figure of speech, then the meaning is much more important than the form and we must do our best to preserve and express the latter in the receptor language even if this must be done at the expense of the form. For example, in “Jesus cursed the fig tree” (Matt. 21:19) we are dealing with a fact the New Testament treats as history—Jesus did not curse an apple tree or a palm tree, but a fig tree. But in Matt. 24:32: “when you see the fig tree put forth leaves” we are dealing with a teaching device. Any tree that gets new leaves at the approach of summer potentially teaches the same lesson.

Again, in Matt. 8:22: “let the dead bury the dead,” there is a difference in the function of the two words *dead*. The first word is referring not to literally dead persons, but to persons who have the characteristics of dead people in their response to God's commands, while the second *dead* definitely refers to literally dead people. Because words are used differently in different contexts we must be able to decide whether we are dealing with history or with teaching devices in each case.

(2) *Is it a frequent verbal symbol in the Scriptures?* Even when we recognize that a given usage is a teaching device, however, we may still want to preserve

the form because the word or object has important symbolic functions in the Bible, e.g. *blood* occurs in the Old Testament in connection with sacrifices and killing, and it is frequently used in the New Testament as a shorthand form for expressing *Christ died*. In other words, *blood* is an important verbal symbol that is used throughout the Bible and plays an important theological role. For example, when Eph. 1:7 says: "In whom we have redemption through his blood", we know that Paul is not speaking about the blood that came from the nail wounds in Jesus' hands and feet, nor of the fluid that flowed from his side when the Roman soldier pushed in his spear, but that he is really referring to the whole event of Christ's death. In this case we are obviously dealing with a non-literal meaning and therefore a teaching device, but because this very form has such great symbolic value in the Scriptures, we must make every effort to conserve it.⁴ Other figures of this nature would include: *cross*, *lamb*, etc. In fact, for some scholars the reference to the fig tree in Matt. 24:32 is a reference to Israel since in the Old Testament Israel is frequently alluded to as a fig tree. If this is the case, then of course it would fall into our second category—that of an important symbol whose original form should be preserved.

(3) *Is there focus on the form in the context?* In the presentation of any discourse some of the items are in focus and others are part of the background. Thus even though a word is classified as an historical fact, we may find that it belongs to the background and that the attention is not actually being focused on it. On the other hand, even a didactic device may be in focus, e.g. in John 3 where the Greek *pneuma* is used for both "wind" and "spirit" we have a word play based on the source language form which we are unable to reproduce in English.

Types of Adjustment when Source Language Form is absent from or has a different Meaning in the Receptor Language

The following listing is an attempt to be exhaustive, but the author is very much aware of how difficult it is to be truly exhaustive, and so would encourage translators who read this and who notice omissions of problems and solutions to communicate them to the author or the editor.

(1) *Exchange the Biblical form for a culturally equivalent form in the receptor language*, e.g. when *wheat* is absolutely unknown, *rice* could be substituted for it. This procedure, of course, violates the basic principle elucidated earlier, and I believe should be used only as a last resort, and then only if the degree of deviance between the forms is minor. For example, it might be possible to exchange *wheat* with *rice*, but to exchange *wheat* with *maize* is highly questionable. Other examples that could be cited are: *yoke* as *headband* (Chol of Mexico), *foxes* as *coyotes* (Mazahua of Mexico), and *bread* as *tortillas* (Tzotzil of Mexico).

(2) *Use a more generic term in the source language that includes and therefore does not misrepresent the Biblical form*, e.g. use *grain* for *wheat*. Obviously there are many kinds of grain and this type of translation would not specify

⁴ "Death" as a non-figurative symbol is more frequent in the N.T. than "blood". (Ed.)

which grain, but neither would it deny the specific grain cited in the Bible. The use of a generic word is also a possible solution to the translation of *kissing* in I Cor. 16:20, e.g. *greet each other heartily as Christians ought*. A generic expression of this nature leaves the actual form of the greeting implicit. It does not specify the Biblical form, neither does it deny it like Phillips' use of *handshaking*. Where this solution is used the actual Biblical form can be preserved in an explanatory footnote.

Even though a generic word by itself is largely unspecific, it is often possible to sharpen the focus by the addition of some specifying components. Notice the following possibilities:

(2a) *A generic form used alone*, e.g. *sheep* becomes *domestic animal*, *denario* becomes *a coin*, *lilies* become *flowers*, *bread* becomes *food*, and *silver and gold* becomes *money*.

(2b) *A generic word plus a transliterated Biblical word*. This is most useful with geographical names, e.g. the *city* Jerusalem, the *region* Judea, the *river* Jordan, the *village* Nazareth, etc.; but it can also be used with other cultural categories, e.g. the *religious sect* Pharisees, the *political party* Herodians, etc.

(2c) *The generic word plus a specific loanword from a dominant language*, e.g. in Latin America *sheep* becomes *a domestic animal called oveja* (Spanish), *ship* becomes *a water-travelling vehicle called barco* (Spanish), and *passover* becomes *a fiesta of the Israelites called pascua* (Sierra Zapoteco of Mexico from Spanish).

(2d) *A generic word plus a local comparison*, e.g. *sheep* becomes *a domestic animal like a deer*, *a lamp* becomes *a light like a pitchtorch*, and *wine* becomes *a drink like pulque* (Otomi).

(2e) *A generic word plus a descriptive phrase*, e.g. *a sheep* becomes *a domestic animal that produces wool*; *camel* becomes *a domestic animal that carries burdens* or *a big domestic animal that has a hump on its back*.

(2f) *Sometimes several of these solutions can be combined*, e.g. *nard* becomes *a very expensive perfume oil called nard*.

(3) *Translate the source language form literally but make its implicit meaning explicit in a phrase*. This is especially useful in cases of culturally symbolic actions, e.g. *Pilate washed his hands*, but add *to show his innocence*; or *to fast* becomes *they do not eat in order to worship God*. But we need to recognize in the case of *branches put on the road* cited earlier, the mere addition of *to show welcome* might not be adequate to prevent misunderstanding, but it might be possible to try a combination such as *they welcomed him by putting branches on the road just as we sweep the road*. It can also be used with names, e.g. *Christ, whom God chose*.

(4) *Describe the source language form with or without a generic expression*. Here again we note several sub-categories:

(4a) *A description of the source language form only*, e.g. *sail* as *a big sheet of cloth*, *sickle* as *a curved knife*. The Lengua in Paraguay render the word *clothes* descriptively as *our crawling-in-stuff*.

(4b) *The description of the source language form plus a statement on its functions*, e.g. *a sickle* as *a curved knife used to harvest grain*, or *a sail* as *a big sheet of cloth to make the boat go with the wind*.