

## CRITICISM CAN BE HELPFUL

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One of the best ways to improve a translation draft is to have others criticize it. All too often, when members of a translation team practise criticism, they seem to operate on the basis of the biblical saying: *It is more blessed to give than to receive*. As a result, criticism may cause translators to get upset and work less well together, instead of helping them to cooperate and make a better translation. In fact, it is probably safe to say that attempts at cooperation fail most often because people are unable to handle the job of criticism properly. One of the reasons for this difficulty, of course, grows out of the fact that words not only have referential meaning (the meanings of the object or event referred to by the word), but they also carry various kinds of extra meanings including feelings about words. Consequently—depending on their individual experience—translators frequently feel strongly for or against certain words. This means that the actual basis for the disagreement is often not the denotation (objective meaning of the thing referred to) of the words in question, but their emotive force, the feeling the user of the word has for or against it.

But even where translation committees seem to be able to criticize successfully, they sometimes make an equally damaging, but possibly even worse adjustment, namely, a kind of conspiracy of silence in which one member will give the work of the other only a very superficial review in the hope that their own drafts will receive similar easy-going treatment. Such a committee may in fact enjoy peace and harmony, but at the steep cost of the quality of their translation.

This paper proposes to discuss first the handling of criticism at the various stages of a translation program, and then provides some practical suggestions on the handling of differences of opinion in the course of face-to-face discussion.

### Written versus Oral Criticism

At the early stages of a translation, i.e. prior to the meeting of the Editorial Committee which is responsible for preparing a final draft for publication, it is usually wisest to depend on written criticism. There may be exceptions, of course. For example, if a translation project has several first-draft translators who share their work with each other for comment and criticism, it is sometimes best to permit them to meet and to try and work out some of the possible solutions to major vocabulary problems. However, in general, criticism in writing seems to be much more effective than face-to-face encounters at this stage.

The first advantage is economy in time. At the early stages where everyone knows that no final decisions will be reached, discussions can often go round and round almost endlessly on the same problems. The reason, of course, is that there is no pressure to reach a decision, and the members of the discussion group actually are often talking without having faced all the implica-

tions of the issue. As a result their individual arguments, based on differing partial evidence, tend not to be taken too seriously.

Time is also saved simply by putting criticism into writing. It is not uncommon for a reviewer to go to all kinds of lengths, often on the smallest and most irrelevant items, in the first few pages of his written comments. But gradually, even the most long-winded individual is worn down, and he finds himself becoming more selective and more precise in his comments. He finds it just too time-consuming to write endlessly on matters that do not count. As a result there is a much greater chance that the important issues will be aired adequately and in an atmosphere that will not prevent objective decision-making. If all the small points are examined and discussed orally, the translator of such a first draft often experiences a build-up of resistance to criticism, so that by the time a really important issue is reached, he is often no longer capable of dealing with the issues that are actually crucial to the quality of the translation.

A second advantage of written criticism is precision. When a person reacts orally, he does so often more on the basis of feeling than of reason. His feeling, of course, may be quite correct, but since he has not studied the issue well, he cannot give the precise reason for his objection, and so he just rambles on and on hoping that eventually he will stumble onto a statement of his reasons. If this same individual is forced to write his criticism, he will find himself under strong pressure to be more specific. Furthermore, since he is writing, he knows that he can be called to answer for his words, so he prepares a much more studied and factual statement, one he feels he can actually defend.

Thirdly, written criticism is usually much more impersonal. In oral criticism there is a real danger of irritating the translator rather than dealing with the draft text. Once the critic senses resistance on the part of the first-draft translator, he is more likely to respond in kind at the emotional level. As a result, such discussions often generate a lot of heat but little light.

Written criticism can also be received much more impersonally for various reasons. First, since one is faced with the complete argument of the critic, there is a greater chance that the receptor will consider the whole argument before feeling the need to respond. When faced with the same criticism in oral form, the individual is often so busy arming himself with counter arguments that he is not really listening to the presentation of the other.

Again, since the receiver of written criticism is usually not in a position to respond immediately, his response also will most likely be much more reasoned and more specific. True, on the first reading of written criticism a person's emotional temperature may rise, but since he can leave the criticism without response until a later date when he has had opportunity to cool off and more time to think about the issue, he is much more likely to be able to judge the value of the criticism objectively. As a result the actual problems may emerge more clearly; and once identified, there is a much greater likelihood that they will also be solved adequately.

In other words, both the criticism and the response will more likely be made at the level of reason rather than of emotions if the former is made in writing rather than being presented orally.

### **Written Criticism by the Review Committee**

Since the members of the Review or Reading Committees normally include people from all areas of the speech community, both the physical distances involved and often the size of the group make face-to-face meetings impractical. Thus criticism by this group is usually made in writing. However, the results of such criticism are frequently far from satisfactory, the reason being that the group does not really know what is expected of it. It is therefore often beneficial to have the entire review group meet for several days to be exposed to a common set of translation principles underlying the translation program, and to put into practice what is expected of them on some translated material. If this is done adequately, the group will develop a unity of direction and purpose which will make their suggestions more helpful.

Furthermore, the review group should receive specific written instructions as to what is expected from it. Such instructions should be given not only at the beginning of a project, but should be repeated from time to time, because people who work at the task only occasionally are likely to forget what is expected of them.

*Open versus Closed Draft.* One procedure that often greatly stimulates helpful response from the members of the Review Committee is to present them with a draft that is not closed, i.e. a draft which carries alternatives at the crucial points and thus shows these points where an opinion is being sought. Since the first-draft translators are very often aware of the points at which they face the greatest translation difficulties, they can often indicate this to the reviewer by writing in alternatives. The alternatives will, in the first place, demand that the reviewer make a judgment regarding the several possibilities with which he is faced; and secondly, the alternatives present the reviewer, as it were, with places where he can break into the text without damaging the whole structure. If the text is written in a finished form many readers will hesitate to break into it, and certainly many of them will fail to recognize where the most serious problems lie.

*Involving the Whole Church Community.* In several translation programs it has been possible to involve entire congregations by inviting them to serve as reviewers to criticize the text. Usually this involves reading the manuscript orally before the congregation and discussing the resulting responses. This type of criticism is helpful in getting the church people interested in the translation, but it is useful to the translation program only if there are people present who have access to the text through another language. Persons knowing only one language frequently suggest changes because they do not understand the intended message, and without this knowledge their criticism often can lead to a wrong meaning.

### **Oral Criticism at the Editorial Committee Stage**

In the Editorial Committee criticism must be oral; first of all, because the suggestions and criticisms that have been made by the members of the Review Committee must be carefully weighed, and secondly, because the time has now arrived for making final decisions on the text of the translation.

The very fact that the group at this stage is faced with the responsibility of making final decisions will often place enough pressure on it to keep the discussion centered on the actual issues, and thereby help them to seek meaningful solutions.

*Developing a Team Spirit.* It is crucial that the Editorial Committee members see themselves as members of a team rather than as representatives of various dialect regions or churches who have certain points of view to defend. They must recognize that they will stand or fall together as a team. While no absolute formula for the development of a team spirit can be presented, the coordinator or chairman of the Editorial Committee usually plays a very important role in its creation.

*Procedures for Handling Differences of Opinion.* Because the members of the team are individuals and because they approach the translation task with differing experiences and differing points of view, there are bound to be differences of opinion. Furthermore, they may come from different regions each having its own dialect peculiarities, and in addition, most committees are made up of representatives of more than one church group. For this reason it is very important that the committee have clearly defined guidelines on the basis of which to weigh any differences of opinion that may arise. A very helpful device in this regard has been a measure to gauge the relative value of each point of criticism. Once a committee knows the importance of a given criticism, it will know how much time it should spend on it, and in fact this very classification can often suggest appropriate means of handling it. This approach involves classifying criticism according to four grades of importance: (1) if it involves an error in exegesis, is unintelligible, or misleading; (2) if the translation carries the proper meaning but the construction expressing it is heavy and lacks in elegance or clarity; (3) if it involves matters of style; and (4) if it relates to mechanical details such as punctuation and spelling.

In regard to (1) the committee is, of course, facing something that touches the very heart of the translations effort. The committee is responsible to produce a translation that will be meaningful and readily understandable, and so it should spend whatever time is necessary to solve problems of this nature.

If the criticism is at level (2) the group listens to the problem, other members making their additional comments, but the group pursues the problem only if there is some alternative suggestion available. If there are no alternatives immediately available, but the matter does warrant the committee's further attention, the chairman may refer it to one or more members of the team for presentation at a later meeting.

Criticism at level (3) relating to matters of style is, of course, the most tricky. Languages have more than one way of saying the same thing, but individuals often have strong feelings about which way is more elegant. In fact, in most committees matters of style take up more time than any other problem, and often the group is not the most effective body to deal with them. If there is no official stylist to whom the matter can be referred, the

chairman should very quickly have the group decide whether or not they are discussing a matter of style. When it is a question of style, he can suggest that the first-draft translator, who carries the responsibility for the overall style of the draft, be allowed to choose the alternative he prefers. If this person does not want to make a decision on his own, the committee may want to vote, but such matters should not be allowed to become committee arguments and should not take up time unduly.

Regarding matters of punctuation, spelling, and other mechanical items, the committee makes broad general decisions and then leaves the actual application of these principles to the secretary of the group. For example, in the Guarani translation program in Paraguay there was considerable difference of opinion in regard to word division. After long and heated discussions the committee finally made some basic decisions on how word division should be carried out, and from then on the matter was left to the secretary to apply these rules consistently. This decision eliminated much tension from the committee sessions, and greatly speeded up its work.

### **Functions of the Committee Chairman<sup>1</sup>**

To a large extent the success of the Editorial Committee will depend on the effectiveness of the man in the chair. His first responsibility is to see that all members of the committee participate adequately and that no one individual dominates the discussions. In fact, he must be especially sensitive to the feelings of the individual team members. Very frequently something quite extraneous to the translation task may have made one or other member somewhat touchy. When this happens, the chairman should see to it that this individual is not pressed unduly.

The chairman is also responsible for the application of the measurement of the value of the criticism. When a given individual becomes too long-winded, the chairman may inquire at what level he is criticizing the draft. If he says he is speaking at level (1), but a quick check with the rest of the group reveals that they feel it is at level (3), then, of course, the chairman has a fairly objective basis on which to limit the discussion.

Frequently it becomes essential that the chairman interrupt an overly long speech to summarize a rambling presentation. The individual speaking may have a point, but he may also have difficulty in establishing it. The chairman who is sensitive to the point the individual is trying to make asks the individual: "May I summarize to check whether or not I am correct in understanding the point you wish to make?" and then he proceeds to state the issue as concisely and as clearly as possible. If the individual agrees—and he usually does—this can end a time-consuming speech. In like manner the chairman can frequently help the group focus on the important alternatives, for example, the individual criticizing brings up a matter of valid criticism, but there are really other alternatives to be considered. After a reasonable amount of discussion the chairman may say: "I would like to state the alternatives I think the speaker has set forth." He then presents the alterna-

<sup>1</sup> Many committees find it is best to rotate the duty of Chairman among the members in order to maintain a balanced team in the Editorial Committee.—*Ed.*

tives in a precise manner. Frequently this means expanding and adding new alternatives which the chairman sees necessary.

*A System of Referral.* A second major function of the chairman is to prevent persons from hardening in positions which would eventually involve loss of face for someone. One of the most useful means of avoiding such hardening is by referring the matter for further study and for reconsideration at a later meeting. For example, if a person is bringing a criticism at level (2) regarding a difficult or unwieldy construction, the chairman may cut short a long discussion at this point by asking the individual if he has an alternative. If neither he nor anyone else in the group is able to produce a functional alternative on the spot, the chairman refers the matter to the individual who has brought up the point of criticism and asks him to produce an alternative at a later meeting. There is an advantage of referring it to the author of the criticism; if he actually has strong feelings that something is wrong he will also want to do something about it, and because he has, as it were, "stuck out his neck", he will be under pressure to present a good alternative. Or, if he really has no valid basis for his criticism, the responsibility delegated to him will teach him to think twice before he speaks next time.

If several people have strong differences of opinion on an important issue, the chairman may ask these people to meet as a sub-committee to work out a necessary compromise. Frequently it is important to have some neutral individual in this group to act as mediator between the differing opinions.

If no immediate solution seems possible, the chairman may want to refer the issue back to all the members of the committee for reconsideration at their next session. In other words, each member of the Editorial Committee takes home with him a list of problems that will need further research and discussion. They may be able to bring back suggestions after having consulted with speakers in their own areas. Others may require exegetical research, but the immediate goal is the discovery of meaningful alternative renderings.

Occasionally, the issue involved is so serious that the Editorial Committee does not feel it can assume the responsibility to make the decision on its own. In such cases it may be wise to invite the Review Committee to share the decision. This may be done through a questionnaire in which the issues to be decided are clearly stated.

Similarly serious problems can be referred to the UBS translations consultant who will help the committee decide on the best way to solve the problem. Many committee chairmen use referral to the consultant quite often and effectively.

*Reaching a Decision.* Expatriates from the Western world have usually been trained to use voting as a democratic and proper means of resolving differences, but experience in South America, Africa and Asia has shown that voting is not always the best and may even be a very poor means of resolving differences. This writer feels that voting should only be reserved for matters of style which do not involve major issues of translation accuracy. Major problems require *group agreement* for adequate resolution.

If a draft with alternatives has been sent out to the members of the Review

Committee, the Editorial Group has of course at least one ready source of information in the number of people who have chosen one alternative over another. Frequently this count may help the committee in moving toward a consensus or agreement decision. Eventually, however, it is probably the chairman who holds the key to whether or not consensus is reached. If he is able to keep the discussion at an objective level and can help the group to bring the alternatives sharply into focus, the chances for an adequate consensus decision are strengthened. A good leader in a face-to-face society is always one who senses the direction in which consensus is forming a little bit earlier than the rest, and is therefore able to formulate a solution that meets the approval of all at the right moment. The same is true of a good committee chairman.

In summary, criticism properly handled can be helpful in a committee translation. Written criticism serves best in the early stages. The writing of criticisms forces the critic to be more economical, more precise and more selective. Written criticism has in addition the advantage of being less personal and therefore less likely to upset feelings at the early stage. A translation draft which provides choices helps to set the critic at ease, for he feels he is free to step into the translation. Differences of opinion need not cause the break-down of a translation project; these can best be handled by classifying them into four types and all oral discussion of them can be improved by keeping in mind which level of problem is being tackled. The successful handling of committee discussion depends to a large extent upon the skill and awareness of the chairman to the emotional problems involved in criticism.

## IN THE DO-IT-YOURSELF AGE

Bible Society secretaries are frequently involved in some phase of translation work. Most, however, are not directly engaged in preparing information on translation practice or in translating the Scriptures. One outstanding exception has been the Reverend Esko Rintala, Secretary of the Finnish Bible Society, who has written a booklet on translation principles called, after the words of Martin Luther, *Let the Hebrew Words Go*. The chapter titles translated from Finnish are: The Bible gets going; The Bible breaks its chains; The Bible and mission; The Bible Translator in the jungle of language; Help needed from linguistics; What is a "word-accurate" translation; Accurate translation defined; The technique of dynamic equivalence translation; Let the Hebrew words go. This booklet published by the Inner Mission Society in Finland sells for FM 5 (approximately 50 p.).

Rev. Rintala is also one of the main translators of *Today's Finnish New Testament*, which sold 10,000 copies during its first week of publication.