JACOB A. LOEWEN

NON-LITERAL MEANINGS—II
What makes them so difficult to translate?

Dr. Jacob A. Loewen is a Translations Consultant with the United Bible Societies based in Lusaka, Zambia.

After an expatriate and a national translator working in one of the tribal languages of South America had attended a translators' institute and had learned how to translate figures of speech more meaningfully, their indigenous translation helpers became quite excited during their further work and one of them suddenly exclaimed, "Now God is finally beginning to talk to the heart." The translators reported that this change from a literal translation of figures of speech to more natural translation not only increased the enthusiasm of the translation helpers, but it was also followed by a marked increase in the use of the Scriptures in the churches in the area.

The experience of the translators mentioned above shows how important it is to understand and translate non-literal meanings properly. In fact, I am tempted to suggest that the proper handling of figurative language and other non-literal meanings is possibly the most important element in making a good translation. Translators usually want to do their very best and make the very best translation possible, but experience has shown that even the best intention has often not been enough in understanding and translating the non-literal meanings contained in the Biblical text. For the modern reader Biblical figures of speech are often hard to understand even when he has considerable help, but they are even harder to translate meaningfully into another language.

This article aims to highlight a number of the factors that make the translation of non-literal meanings difficult, and to give some general guidelines for their translation.

Figurative language is closely tied to culture

Language as a whole is an expression of culture. It faithfully reflects the values and views of its cultural setting. Figurative language, however, is tied to culture in a special way. With ordinary meanings the components, or parts, that make up the meanings of words are usually related to common things and events. Therefore, they often extend beyond culture and language boundaries—a language in a different culture may use more or less the same components. However, those components which provide the basis for so many types of figurative language, especially for euphemisms and metaphors, are completely tied to culture. A second language may attach the figurative meaning component to a completely different word. To complicate matters even more, where there is an extension of meaning based upon certain components, even a native speaker may often find it difficult to state the component on which a given extension of meaning depends. His feeling tells him that this or that word is correctly used, but he often cannot explain why. In the Bible "white as snow" and "white as wool" are used as similes with identical meanings (Isa. 1.18; Rev. 1.14). English speakers feel that the first figure is proper, but the second is really meaningless because in their present-day culture whiteness is not a component of the meaning of *wool.*

In the first article of this series we have already mentioned the word *fox*, which in European languages has a component of "cleverness", but in other cultures this component is related to a wide variety of animals. When the Commission on Aymara Literacy and Literature prepared an adaptation of the well-known *Heart of Man* in which the seven cardinal sins are each illustrated by the picture of an animal, they found that a completely different series of animals was needed to illustrate these qualities in Aymara. In other words, those special components attached to the meanings of names of certain animals in English, were attached to completely different animal names in Aymara. Furthermore, it was found that when a second adaptation was made for the closely related Quechua language, several more adjustments had to be made, because the components needed for the meaning were not attached to the same animal names in the two languages, even though they were quite similar to each other.

The association of special components with given words often depends upon "accidents" of history or culture. For example, a society may develop a popular animal tale. If such a story is told and retold among the people long enough, the names of the principal characters in the tale will often pick up components of meaning that grow out of the parts they play in such a story.

In Paraguay *cientosiete* "107" at present serves as a euphemistic replacement of the word *homosexual*. This developed several years ago when the government launched a campaign against homosexuals. It arrested all such persons in the capital city and imprisoned them. As more and more people were arrested, it soon became clear that not only so-called anti-social people were involved, but before long they would be arresting persons from high places. Not wanting to embarrass important government and church people the police called off the arrests with the 107th person. This "accident" of history has provided the number 107 with the component of *homosexual*.

Figurative language is often restricted in use

The way special components attach to words is so arbitrary that a non-literal meaning frequently does not even extend over the total area in which a language is spoken. For example, the Spanish word *coger* "take" or "grasp" in southern South America carries a supplementary component of *sex*. As a result it is being avoided in normal conversations or replaced by the word *recoger*. However, in the northern countries of South America *coger* is the normal word "to take", and it is quite free of any such sexual component.

This extends even to the different levels of the same language used in the same area. In the preparation of the Spanish popular language translation, the *Versión Popular* New Testament, it was discovered that many of the figures of speech found in standard Spanish literature could not be used in this translation because they were not used in the everyday speech of the people. A higher-level translation using all the resources of the language would not have had this type of limitation.

Non-literal meanings of this type are often linked within a generation. When the author began primary school in Canada the figurative way of sending away some undesirable person was to say *twenty-three skidoo*. This

was soon replaced by *go jump in the lake*, and the author often hears his own children telling each other to *get lost*.

This temporary quality is still more marked in the case of euphemisms because they serve as replacements of words which carry strong components of feeling that people want to avoid. Since the euphemistic replacements quickly begin to pick up some of the negative qualities of the expressions they are avoiding, they in turn must be replaced by new euphemisms. In Canada *water closet* has lost its euphemistic value for the average speaker. In fact, even *washroom* and *restroom* are rapidly being replaced by *powder room*, *lounge*, etc. For this reason translators need to be careful not only to use known expressions, but to use expressions that are either fairly stable or in the process of gaining acceptance. The use of an outdated expression or one that is on the way out, will limit the usefulness of a translation.

The native speaker cannot always use figurative language well

Figurative usage is obviously not easy for the expatriate to master. If the fine points of meaning and structure take an expatriate twenty years or more to master, the ability to create meaningful new figures of speech will require even more time. However, being a mother-tongue speaker of a language is not a full guarantee for adequate handling of its figurative usages either. A native speaker will usually recognize the commonly used figures in his mother tongue, but not every speaker of a language will know, and much less be able to use, the full range of figures the language can employ. Furthermore, good literature and possibly also good translation should contain new figures; and knowing which meanings can be effectively extended, and in which direction, requires rare skill.

The educated speaker of a language that is not used for education often has a further problem—one that grows out of his educational experience. If his education was not carried on in his mother tongue, but in one of the "world languages" like English or French, his problems may be mulitplied. He may not have mastered the figurative usage of this second language, and as a result have become used to a kind of "translationese". The sad fact of this type of situation is that it not only affects the second language, but it often also makes the person insensitive to the natural figurative usage of his own mother tongue.

The problem of non-literal meanings in translation is made more difficult by the fact that the translator actually needs to master figurative usage in at least three languages: (1) the original source language—Greek or Hebrew, (2) the source language of the translation where the original is not used as translation base—German, English, or French, and (3) the language into which the translation is being made. Any exaggerated idea of the importance of Greek or Hebrew or too much attachment to the language of his education can become serious hindrances to the effectiveness of even a national translator

Special problems for the expatriate translator

If the proper handling of figurative usage presents difficulties to the translator working in his own language, such problems are much greater for the expatriate translator who is working in a second language. In the first

place, he may not be an artist in the use of figurative language in his own language, and often he has wrong ideas about the original language of the Bible. In fact, if he is a faithful Bible reader he may be so thoroughly used to the translationese that is found in the old version of his own language that he finds it almost impossible to let go of some of the meaningless forms. In addition he has to learn the figurative usage of the new language, and this figurative language is not only difficult to learn to understand and to use properly, it is even harder to discover. Finally, his feeling about whether a given Biblical form can be used in the new language will not be trustworthy. It is these difficulties with non-literal meanings, as well as other problems, that make a first draft prepared by an expatriate such a serious problem. Such a draft will often have reduced too many Biblical figures to non-figures, and the national revisers may not have the courage or the skill to replace them. Or it may have introduced translationese figures of speech which the national revisers find hard to eliminate or correct.

Why not translate figurative language literally?

The answer to this question is simple: because we are dealing with non-literal meaning. Articles in *The Bible Translator* have already emphasized this point frequently, but it is important enough to repeat it again here. Because so many figures are based on special components, there is little chance that another language will attach those components to the same words. If the result were only loss of meaning, the problem might not even be too serious. The reader would simply just not understand certain expressions. He might become discouraged, but with adequate teaching he might eventually come to understand. Usually, however, people are not content to leave a meaningless blank in the text, and for that reason they make an attempt to attach at least some meaning to the problem expression. For example, when rural speakers of Spanish in northern South America were faced with the Biblical figure "children of the bridechamber" (Mark 2.19) translated literally into Spanish as *hijos de las bodas*, many of them decided that this expression referred to the children who were legitimized by means of the parents' wedding. (This conclusion was reached because many couples lived together and had children before they were married, and marriages often took place only when children were grown up enough to require legal birth certificates.) Still others felt that the expression referred to the children who were conceived on the wedding night. There is real danger that a wrong interpretation can come in long before teaching can correct it.

An equally great danger arises out of the fact that when a figure of speech from one language is translated literally into another language where it is not used as a figure, the reader will take it literally. Thus, for example, in many languages the expression *Son of Man* becomes a direct denial of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ because people understand that Jesus was literally the son of a man and thus not the son of God.

A third problem arises from the fact that a word which functions figuratively in the Bible may also have figurative function in the receptor language, but the local meaning is quite different from the Biblical meaning. In an article discussing metaphors and similes John Beekman quotes a number of

local Mexican figurative usages of words also used figuratively in the Bible but with different meanings, for example:

Stone in Villa Alta Zapotec means "one who refuses to move from a job", in San Esteban Mixteco it means "a selfish person who lies around uselessly", and in Tepeuxila Cuicateco it means "one who cannot walk or talk properly".

Fox in Tepeuxila Cuicateco means "homosexual", in Villa Alta Zapotec it means "one who cries very often or very much", in Otomi of the State of Mexico it means "one who steals", in Pame it is "a heartless killer", and in Teutla Cuicateco it is "a good hunter".

Sheep in Pame means "one who does not understand", in Teutla Cuicateco it is "a drunkard who doesn't hit back when he is hit", in Otomi it is "a person who doesn't answer properly when he is spoken to", and in Villa Alta Zapotec it is "a young fellow who is often seen waiting for or following a girlfriend".

If sheep were used in a translation into Zapotec in "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1.29) the Zapotecs would understand "Look at that fellow who is always hanging around his girlfriend". Again, for the Shipibo "sons of thunder" translated literally would suggest "people of evil spirit origin".

Frequently this problem is made still more difficult by the fact that a word used figuratively in the Bible is used with more than one non-literal meaning. In other words, several special components can be associated with a given word, and each of these components will produce a different figurative meaning. For example *world* can be a metonym referring to "the people of the world" (John 3.16), or it can be a metonym referring to "the things in the world" (Mark 8.36). John Beekman reports that a Cuicateco reader of the New Testament was very much puzzled when he read Mark 8.36. He could not see why God would not be happy if a man would win all the world's people for Christ even if it should cost the man's soul. The basis of his misunderstanding was that he understood *world* as a metonym for *people*, but he did not understand its second meaning as a metonym for the *material things* in this world. The Bible uses many words with more than one figurative extension.

Hints on translation from the Bible itself

A good translator not only tries to avoid errors of information or language but he also tries to *prevent* his reader or hearer from misunderstanding wherever possible. In regard to the matter of avoiding misunderstanding we find some interesting hints in the text of the Bible itself.

In many places the Bible expresses cultural information in words, if the writer believed the reader or hearer needed it for proper understanding. Thus when writing about Egypt for later generations living in Palestine who no longer remembered it from first-hand experience, the writer frequently felt it essential to give the necessary cultural information. For example, "they served him (Joseph) by himself . . . *because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews for that is an abomination to the Egyptians*" (Gen. 43.32). Again, "that you may dwell in the land of Goshen (separate from the Egyptians) *for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians*" (Gen. 46.34).

In a similar vein older Hebrew cultural practices not known to the new generation are also stated. For example: "Formerly in Israel when a man went to inquire of God he said, 'Come let us go to the seer', *for he who is now called the prophet was formerly called a seer*" (1 Sam. 9.9). Again, "*Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, one drew off a sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel*" (Ruth 4.7).

The New Testament has a very similar approach to expressing meaning. We see it especially in the Gospel of John, which was probably written for an audience which was not only Jewish. For example, "Now six stone jars were standing there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, Fill up the jars with water . . ." (John 2.6–7). Again, "Then the Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you, a Jew, ask drink of me, a Samaritan woman? *For Jews have no dealing with Samaritans*" (John 4.9). Also, "to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (*for their sabbath day was an high day*)" (John 19.31).

Even Mark feels it necessary to explain certain cultural details. "They (Pharisees) saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. (*For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.*)" (Mark 7.2–4, RSV).

In similar manner in the New Testament those Hebrew and Aramaic names whose meaning would escape the non-Hebrew readers are frequently explained: "Golgotha (which means place of the skull)" (Mark 15.22, RSV), "Messiah (which means Christ)" (John 1.41, RSV), "Siloam (which means Sent)" (John 9.7, RSV), "Rabboni (which means Teacher)" (John 20.16, RSV), "Corban (that is given to God)" (Mark 7.11, RSV), "Emmanuel (which means, God with us)" (Matt. 1.23, RSV). Frequently such historical or cultural information is added by means of a phrase which stands next to a name: "Pharaoh, *the King of Egypt*" (Deut. 7.8), "Passover, *the feast of the Jews*" (John 6.4).

Where a likely wrong interpretation needs to be prevented, sufficient information is introduced into the context for the purpose. For example, "The Pharisees heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (*although Jesus himself did not baptize, only his disciples*)" (John 4.2), and "Judas, *not Iscariot*, said" (John 14.22). Similarly since the word *kill* has an expected component of intent, where intent is not meant it is clearly denied: "Whoso killeth his neighbor *ignorantly*" (Deut. 9.14); "Which should kill his neighbor *unawares*" (Deut. 14.42).

Putting necessary information in words is also used in relation to figures of speech. Notice the following examples:

Euphemism: "Her soul was departing, *for she died*" (Gen. 35.18)
Extension or metonym: "The disciples ate with hands defiled, *that is unwashed*" (Mark 7.2)
Metaphor: "The winepress of the *wrath* of God" (Rev. 14.19, RSV)
Metaphor: "(drunk) from the wine of *her immorality*" (Rev. 17.2, TEV)

Simile: "I will make your descendents as the dust of the earth so that *if anyone can count the dust of the earth, your descendents also can be counted* (Gen. 13.16).

In the case of figurative comparisons, similes and metaphors, we find a surprisingly large number in which all the parts of the comparison are stated in the text. What is especially surprising is the number of occurrences in which the ground of comparison (the special component on which the figurative meaning is based) is clearly stated.

Similes: "And the lion shall *eat straw* like an ox" (Isa. 11.7)
"All we like sheep have *gone astray*" (Isa. 53.6)
"They are *still* as a stone" (Ex. 15.16)

Metaphors: "The Lord, the shield of *thy help*" (Deut. 33.29)
"A *wild* ass of a man" (Gen. 16.12)
"With the wine of whose fornication the dwellers of earth have become *drunk*" (Rev. 17.2, RSV).

There also are many examples where non-literal meaning is marked by specially added components. Notice the non-literal uses of the following expressions which carry markers: "*Heavenly* Father" (Matt. 18.35), "Our Father *in heaven*" (Matt. 6.9), "The *heavenly* Jerusalem" (Heb. 12.22), "Children *of God*" (Matt. 5.9).

Other signals of non-literal usage can be seen in "*Humanly speaking*, I fought with beasts of Ephesus" (1 Cor. 15.32, RSV), or "The abomination of desolation" with the note "*let the reader understand*" (Mark 13.14).

Summary

Let us now summarize some of the main ideas in this article:

(1) Figurative language cannot be translated literally because its meaning is usually completely tied to one culture.

(2) Figurative usages often seem very arbitrary, since they develop out of very specific local experiences.

(3) Often a figurative usage will be quite regional; because one person uses it, that does not mean that all people know it.

(4) Euphemisms and certain other such non-literal usages tend to change frequently.

(5) Second language speakers as a rule, and often even mother-tongue speakers, have difficulty in mastering the full range of figurative usage.

(6) The model of the Bible itself suggests that a wide range of information which is carried by the text but not in words needs to be expressed in words in a translation. The aim is always full understanding by the reader.

One final note about the importance of keeping the same proportion of figures in the translation as there were in the original text. Since we have to translate some figures by non-figures, we will have to introduce new figures where the text has none, to replace those that were lost in translation. In fact I want to suggest that if a translator wants both a text that is simple in sentence structure, and one that will still "speak powerfully" to the readers, he will have to make sure that it contains many figures of speech. Studies of simplified literary masterpieces show that frequently difficult structure can be exchanged for a larger number of figures and other non-literal usages.