

PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

*Published twice yearly
(April and October)
by the United Bible
Societies*

Vol. 37, No. 2, April 1986

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WHO AM I TRANSLATING FOR?

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A long period of involvement in Bible translating has convinced me that this question is one of the most fundamental, if not **the** most fundamental question every translator must ask himself. Furthermore, I feel that all translators must ask this question not once, but repeatedly, if not every day.

Most people, especially when they first begin to translate, concentrate their thinking on the text. Some see their task as being that of merely transferring, somehow or other, the original message into the language of the receptor. If in addition, as is the case with many Bible translators, they have a concern about being faithful to the source text—or even more so, if they have a built-in fear of divine punishment if they should fail to represent the original accurately—then we usually have set the stage for a wooden, literal translation that will be extremely hard to understand. *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (pages 14 on) calls such translations, formal correspondence translations.

However, even trained translators who have meaningful translating as their objective, often fall far short of achieving it. The problem becomes even more acute when translators define their goal as a meaningful translation in common or popular language. (By common language we here mean a translation that restricts itself to the vocabulary, grammar and syntax that all users of the same language share in common.) For one thing, the translators themselves, because of their education, will often feel more at home with the higher level forms. In some cases they may even feel a subtle pressure to demonstrate their knowledge by employing a higher level of language, or to display their Bible knowledge by employing all sorts of church jargon. Even where none of the above apply, experience has shown that translators very frequently tend to drift into ever higher levels of language, often without even being conscious of the fact.

As I have already suggested, if there has been an established church in the area for a long period of time already, then usually there is also a good amount of transliterated or at least literally translated church jargon. If the translator is a regular churchgoer, as is the usual case, then the temptation to fall back on this jargon in his translation is almost

inevitable. This brings us to the central concern of this paper: Are there any simple techniques available to help the average translator make sure that he is using a language level that is appropriate for the target audience he has chosen? I think there are!

Identify the target audience

First of all, he must carefully identify his target audience. I have found the audience priorities established in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (pages 31-32) to be extremely useful. Here are those priorities together with some comments:

1. The understanding of the message by non-church people takes precedence over the understanding of church people. If a translation uses the language the way the people ordinarily speak it in the market place, then believers should understand everything as well as non-believers. The converse, however, is often not true. First of all, because churchgoers in general have more background knowledge of the subject matter and secondly, as already indicated, church people tend to develop special vocabulary to speak of religious matters. Non-churchgoers generally do not know this church language.

Most translators will agree that the translation they are making is to be an evangelistic tool for reaching people outside of the church. If they take this fact seriously, they must avoid all church jargon and speak the language as it is spoken ordinarily in the market place. There is an additional reason for avoiding church jargon, namely, that such jargon very frequently will produce strong negative reactions from outsiders, and thus may prejudice them to the point where they won't give the Bible message an adequate hearing.

2. The understanding of women takes precedence over the understanding of men. This priority, too, is based on several factors. **First**, because in most Third-World societies, men have more experience outside of the local community than women have. They have a wider awareness of other cultures. They usually hear and speak more languages than women do. They usually also have much more experience with loanwords from neighboring or national languages. **Second**, because men usually still have much greater access to education and so their literary skills are often much more developed. **Third**, because women, as mothers, in most societies spend a lot more time with smaller children than fathers do during the crucial years of attitude forming. Thus if a mother who cannot read very well never even attempts to read the Bible and regards it as a "men's book"—a book women cannot read or understand—then her children will develop a correspondingly negative attitude towards the Scriptures. If, however, children see their mother spend much of her spare time reading and studying the Bible, they will develop a very different and more positive attitude toward the Scriptures.
3. The speech of people of child-bearing age is more important than the

speech of old people, or of teenagers. In the case of old people we are usually dealing with archaic forms of the language, and in the case of teenagers we are often dealing with slang forms that come in and go out very quickly. It is the people who are bearing and raising children who are teaching the language to the next generation. For this reason their speech forms should take precedence.

4. In larger societies, where there are distinct social classes and/or wide differences in level of education, there often are additional factors that need to be considered before the target audience can be defined adequately. For example, when the common language Farsi New Testament was being planned, it was discovered that eighty percent of the people dropped out of school at the end of the sixth year of elementary education. In this case the grade six language level was very important and so its characteristics were identified and defined by studying all the textbooks of that school year.

Accepting these priorities in principle, usually is not difficult for translators; however putting them into practice consistently is another matter. In Africa, where age still commands a lot of respect, it is often next to impossible for younger translators to resist archaic words proposed by a respected elder. Furthermore, we must not forget the pull of higher level language and the insidious attraction of church jargon, both of which we have discussed earlier. In fact, it has been my experience that whenever I asked the general question: "Will people understand this?" translators invariably came back with "Everybody understands that." However, when we then proceeded to make tests in actual village situations, we found that the translators' quick answer was often dead wrong—many people in their chosen target audience did not understand. This raises the question: "Is there any means by which we can help the translator to focus better on his target audience? Is there any simple yardstick he can use to determine in advance whether something will be understood or not?" Here is something I have found to be extremely helpful.

Have particular people in mind

Once a translator has identified the characteristics of his target audience, he should select, by name, four or five people who are typical members of this target audience. Not every person chosen will represent all the priorities, but all the priorities should be represented by at least one person. Now the translator must learn to ask himself: "Does so-and-so understand this?" or "How would I say this if I were at this moment speaking to him/her?" Thus his question no longer is whether non-Christians in general will understand this, but whether this particular non-Christian will understand this.

As soon as the translator spells out his target audience in terms of specific people whom he has identified by name, I as translation consultant, immediately copy those names into my notebook. Having

these names is very important, for now I too can ask whether that woman understands, rather than whether women in general understand. Time and again, I have been able to test the validity of this approach by first asking the general question: "Will non-Christians understand this?" Invariably the translators will affirm that they all understand this. If I then ask the specific question: "Does non-Christian Mrs So-and-so (from the translator's own list) understand this?" there frequently is a short hesitation and then a negative answer—because the translator has just been replaying the scene of telling Mrs So-and-so in his mind and has just decided that to her he would say it differently. Once translators learn to imagine such personal communication situations all the time, the quality of their work usually improves dramatically.

If I visit a team only infrequently, I usually try to make sure that the representative audience list is still up to date, because non-Christians can become Christians, people move away, or they get more education. If a translator keeps his list up to date, and makes his translation with these people constantly in his mind, he will have several advantages: (a) he can readily go and check whether his translation is being easily understood or not; (b) if he does, he will reinforce his own consciousness of what the requirements of his chosen target audience actually are; and (c) the receptors of his translation will feel as if God were somehow addressing them personally.

JILL SMITH

DEALING WITH PROPER NOUNS IN TRANSLATION

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The following notes discuss some of the most common questions arising in the treatment of proper nouns in the Bible. They offer some guidelines in accordance with methods frequently applied in new translations. Translators are of course also expected to refer to the standard "base" and "model" versions of the Bible, and to make use of the United Bible Societies' series of Handbooks and Guides for translators, which also offer suggestions and guidelines in specific instances.

Transliterating and borrowing

The normal practice in Bible translating is to borrow names by transliterating the original forms from the biblical source languages into equivalent forms appropriate to the language of translation (the "receptor" language). In many cases these borrowed forms are influenced by usage in languages predominant in the area, or by usage in a prevailing trade language or lingua franca such as English, French, Portuguese, or Swahili.