

SHOULD A TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE BE AMBIGUOUS?

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In a recent article entitled "New Meanings for Old", Dr. Eugene Nida wrote: "Some people have argued that a translator should try to reproduce everything that is ambiguous and obscure in the biblical texts in a way that is ambiguous and obscure in his translation." (*The Bible Translator*, April 1980, page 228.) The translators of the Bible in current French have often received similar comments. For instance, I recently read a letter criticizing the translation of 2 Corinthians 2.15-16 in *Bonnes nouvelles aujourd'hui*, the New Testament in current French. The writer of this letter concluded by saying: "In the last resort what we are asking is not that one interpretation should be preferred to another; it is that the legitimate desire to make the text clear should not take priority over the need to respect the original in its ambiguities . . .". In a certain number of other cases too the translators have been accused of making a paraphrase or of "obstructing the meaning" when we have given an understandable translation of the text, based on an interpretation which is supported by reputable commentaries, instead of making a literal translation which would be very difficult to understand.

In fact there is a great deal of confusion on the subject of what are (too easily) referred to as "ambiguities", simply because people have not studied the question well enough and are content with a few second-hand ideas. For instance people commonly mix up two kinds of ambiguities: ambiguities which are intended by the author of the original text (the text that we have to translate), and ambiguities which are not intended, and which it would be better to call obscurities, because for a variety of reasons we cannot understand exactly what the author wanted to say. And we should add that, in the case of people who only know the biblical text through translations, many so-called ambiguities that they refer to are really obscurities which are due to bad translation technique, particularly literalism. It is necessary therefore to take the trouble to study this problem in depth. And it is necessary in particular to make a clear distinction between real ambiguities, which must be kept as such in translation or signalled by means of a note, and apparent ambiguities for which it is possible to find an appropriate meaning with the help of good commentaries.

To deal with this subject we will consider the following questions: What is an ambiguity? Why do ambiguities occur? How should the translator deal with a text which is apparently ambiguous (that is, obscure to the eyes of the present-day reader when it would probably not have been obscure for the author and his first readers)? What should the translator do when he meets an ambiguity which the author intended (a play on words for example)?

What is an ambiguity? And why do ambiguities occur?

According to my dictionary a term or passage is ambiguous if it may have

two or more possible meanings, and if, as a result, its interpretation is uncertain. Here we should make one important comment: generally (although there can be exceptions as we will soon see) an author who is concerned about communicating a message, as is the case with the biblical authors, tries to be understood. So if there is any uncertainty it is on the part of the reader or hearer, and not in the mind of the author or speaker. As C. J. Fillmore says: "It seems more clearly wrong to speak of ambiguity from the speaker's than from the hearer's point of view, if only for the reason that a speaker may intend an utterance to be ambiguous, or he may not know what it is that he is saying." (*Working Papers in Linguistics*, 1968, page 43.)

We know from experience that it often happens that the reader of a message is not sure of its real meaning. For instance when we are translating the Bible we often ask ourselves what is the exact significance of the passage before us. So it will be good to define the main causes of those ambiguities which are not intended by the author, and to try to answer the question: Where do the ambiguities in a given text come from, from the reader's point of view? To this question the linguist would reply that ambiguities can be due to two different causes. Firstly, words can have many meanings. In French the word *temps* can correspond to the English "time" or "weather", it depends on the context in which it is found.

In this matter of the meaning of words I can remember having once made a very serious mistake in translation with an English text in which the word "spring" occurred: I understood it in the sense of the French *printemps* ("the season of spring") when really the meaning was that of the French *ressort* ("a spiral spring"). Needless to say the meaning of the text, which was related to industrial problems, was completely ruined!

Secondly, ambiguity can be due to the fact that a phrase has a grammatical structure that can be interpreted in different ways. We will look at two examples of this. The first is taken from D. T. Langendoen: "Consider the unlucky chap who said to his wife, 'I love you like your mother', when he meant 'I love you like your mother loves you', whereas his wife, knowing his dislike for his mother-in-law took him to mean, 'I love you like I love your mother'. Either meaning is potentially there, of course, in the original utterance, so that neither of them can be blamed for the breakdown of communication that took place in this situation." (*Practical Anthropology*, May-June, 1968, page 116.)

The second example is taken from E. A. Nida: it concerns the expression "*the fat major's wife* (which) may mean that either the major is fat or the wife is fat. If the expression comes from the kernel *the fat major has a wife* the first meaning is intended; but if the expression is derived from *the major has a fat wife* then it is the second meaning. It so happens that the transforms of these two expressions are formally identical, and accordingly an ambiguity arises." (*Toward a Science of Translating*, page 61.) As this quotation from Nida indicates, grammatical ambiguities are explained by the fact that the same surface structure (*the fat major's wife*) can result from the transformation of two different kernel expressions (*the fat major has a wife* and *the major has a fat wife*). Now if we translate this expression into another language, must we "respect the ambiguity of the original text" as people are demanding that we do

in other cases? We note that in French this is impossible: in this language, in fact, the adjective must agree in gender and number with the word which it qualifies. We would have to say either *la grosse femme du major* or *la femme du gros major* (*grosse* in the feminine form where the adjective is related to the wife; *gros* in the masculine form where it refers to the major). As a result the translator is forced to resolve the ambiguity before he can translate the expression into French. When it comes to this, are we going to say, like the critics we have referred to, that something is lost in the translation because we have not respected the ambiguity of the English expression? No. If the translator took the trouble to examine the original text carefully in order to discover what the author really meant, that would allow him to choose the one correct meaning out of the two possibilities.

But how is the translator going to go about resolving such problems? That is what we will look at next.

How can we resolve apparent ambiguities?

In the examples given above you will have noticed that we were dealing with isolated words or expressions, that is words or expressions without any context. Now in the great majority of cases the context of an expression which appears ambiguous at first will enable us to see the correct sense: we may hesitate for a moment as to the meaning, but the next phrase or the whole paragraph will usually put an end to the hesitation. A real and continuing ambiguity only occurs rarely, because in order to create it the context itself would have to give rise to uncertainty in the mind of the reader.

To show how most ambiguities are resolved by the context, let us look again at the examples given in the last section.

(a) *Spring*. As I have said, the text where this word occurred was intended for an industrial setting. Even before considering the actual written context, this fact should have indicated that the meaning was more likely to be that of the French word *ressort* than of the word *printemps*. And the actual context confirmed this: it was speaking of new machinery of a type that would require the meaning of the word *ressort* in French. The situation would have been different if the text had spoken of delays in the delivery of a machine, and indicated that it would be available "in the spring"; but this was not the case, as a careful examination of the text showed.

(b) "*I love you like your mother*". Here we are dealing with words spoken by a husband to his wife. We can imagine that the wife's reaction, her angry attitude, would have immediately made the husband realize that the words had not been taken in the sense which he had intended. In normal circumstances when he became aware of the misunderstanding he would make an explanation to his wife to point out his real intention. He might give his words a fuller context, in order to remove the ambiguity. It is worth noting as well here that D. T. Langendoen, the author of the article from which we have taken this example, finishes up by concluding that "although there are potential ambiguities throughout our use of language, these discrepancies affect only a relatively small percentage of speech forms in actual communication." (Page 116 in the article referred to above.)

(c) "*The fat major's wife*". Here is how Nida himself explains the way the

ambiguity of the expression is resolved by the context: "*The fat major's wife* is ambiguous, but there is no such ambiguity in the fuller expression *the fat major's wife was always promising to diet but never kept at it.*" (*Towards a Science of Translating*, pages 101-102.) As a matter of fact the whole sentence enables us to recognize that the kernel sentence which is behind the expression we are considering can only be *the major has a fat wife*: it is the wife who promises to diet because she is too fat; nobody would ever think that she was going to diet because her husband was too fat!

So the translator who is often confused as to the exact meaning of an expression in his source text should turn his attention to the context to see if it will enable him to discover the most likely solution. However, he should be aware that the ambiguities which he meets are not all easy to resolve, although most will be. Even if an author does not intend to be ambiguous, it may happen that he does not express himself very clearly, and this causes uncertainty for his reader. It is well known that some authors are more difficult to understand than others. Or, depending on the subject of the writing, it may be that the use of specialized language, with words that many people do not know or words used in other than their normal sense, gives rise to lack of understanding, misunderstanding, or confusion because of something that seems ambiguous. In this case the easy way out for translators is to give a literal translation, word for word, and leave it to the reader to understand whatever he can. But what happens at that point? Either the reader gives up trying to understand an obscure passage; or else he interprets it in his own way, with an interpretation which has a good chance of being wrong, because normally the reader of a translation does not have available to him items of information which the translator has. It is therefore the translator himself who ought to take the trouble to discover the meaning of the source text before he translates it. If he is dealing with the Bible he can get help from good commentaries in order to find at least a well-supported interpretation on which to base his translation. In this way the reader is led to take a meaning which is very likely to be correct, instead of reading wrong ideas into the text.

Staying in the biblical area now, we should point out that it often happens that expressions which are not very clear for us today probably did not cause any particular problem for the early readers. They would not have been ambiguous for them. Where then does our difficulty come from? To begin with it results from the fact that we are not part of the same linguistic and cultural situation as the first readers: in relation to the text we can speak of our "linguistic and cultural distance". Let us take the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6.9-13) as an example of this. In the TOB New Testament (Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible, in French) we find a note referring to the problems involved in translating this prayer: "The translation of this prayer in a modern language presents particular difficulties. The Greek text bears the marks of the original Semitic language. Certain expressions require a good understanding of the Old Testament and of Judaism for their proper interpretation. The specialists themselves do not agree on what meaning to give to a certain term (see verse 11) or a certain formula (see verse 13). We can well understand that in these circumstances the old translations often preferred to just translate the Greek text word for word. However this solution, which refuses to take any risks, leaves the

reader with obscurities and ambiguities which were not part of the original text. That is why it has been felt necessary to propose here a translation which, without any pretence at being liturgical, tries with the help of notes to bring new light to this important text." (We should underline three times in this quotation the statement that "obscurities or ambiguities are not part of the original text"!)

The difficulties which are pointed out are real ones for us, because we are not in the same linguistic and cultural situation as the author Matthew and those he was writing to. We do not have today certain information that they shared, and that is why what are "obscurities" or "ambiguities" for us would not have been for the first readers.

But it is the duty of the translator to take advantage of the research done by specialists with a view to recovering at least part of that information which Matthew and his readers shared. For example the note in TOB refers to two particular difficulties in the Lord's Prayer: in verse 11 and verse 13. These two problems are both discussed by D. Arichea in a recent article in *The Bible Translator* (April 1980, pages 219-223). In verse 11 no one knows the exact meaning of the Greek term which is often translated *daily* in English ("our daily bread"). Arichea shows that there are three main interpretations: 1. *for today* 2. *for tomorrow* 3. *needed for existence*. After choosing one interpretation for the translation it would be a good idea to mention the others in a note. As to verse 13, we can see that Arichea gives four possibilities for translating this (see the article already referred to, page 233). Here also a note would be necessary.

So some of the obscurities of the original text for us are due to the linguistic and cultural distance between ourselves and the author and his first readers. The exact shades of meaning of the terms in the Lord's Prayer would have been well known in the Judaism of the first century, although they escape us. However in other cases the obscurities, or our uncertainties, come from our ignorance of a particular situation which was so well known to the author and the people he was writing to that there was no need for the author to describe it in detail: he was referring to events which it is difficult for us to reconstruct. An example of this is found in 1 Corinthians 7.36-38, over which there is disagreement today as to its correct interpretation. The Christians in Corinth had put a series of questions to Paul which he was answering, particularly in chapter 7. (See 1 Cor 7.1: "Now, to deal with the matters you wrote about", GNB). Paul and the Corinthian Christians knew exactly what the questions were about, and so the apostle had no need to repeat them. But by contrast we no longer know them, and so we are forced to try to reconstruct them from the answers given by Paul. Thus in verses 36 to 38 it is difficult to know whether the reference is to a girl whom her father hesitates to give in marriage, or to a girl and the man she has promised to marry. The GNB decides on the second possibility, as does the NT in current French, but it indicates the other possibility (which we cannot exclude) in a note at the foot of the page. It is certain that Paul was not being deliberately ambiguous, and that his first readers would have known what he was saying; but that is not the case for us. All that we can do, then, is to consult good commentaries which will enable us to decide as well as we can, and after that we can give an unambiguous translation, without excluding the other interpretation, which we put in a note.

We can see from the last two examples given, those of the Lord's Prayer and 1 Cor 7.36-38, that the context is not always sufficient to completely resolve an unintended ambiguity or obscurity in the original text. But these two examples also show that it is possible to reach a well-founded idea of the probable meaning of the text, perhaps putting a variant meaning in a note in the most difficult cases. The solution of simply translating word for word, deliberately leaving the text obscure, is a lazy way out. More than this, it is really a betrayal of the author, since it leaves the impression that he didn't know exactly what he was saying, contrary to what must have been the case.

How should we deal with an ambiguity which was intended by the author?

Many ambiguities are only apparent and can be resolved with the help of the context or of a close study of the text. However there are also some ambiguities which the author plainly intends, and these present the translator with some rather delicate problems. In this regard we can give in particular the examples of plays on words and of certain poetic forms. In these the author uses forms or ways of speaking which are intended to produce association of ideas or different feelings in the mind of the hearer or reader. Since I do not want to deal with all the aspects of this subject, I will restrict myself to giving some typical Biblical examples.

The language of John's Gospel provides some characteristic examples of what we mean by ambiguities that are intended. In chapter 3 we meet in verses 3 and 7 a Greek term which can be translated either "from above" or "again" ("born from above" or "born again"). The TOB translates this *naître d'en-haut*, "born from above" (because it is impossible to find in French a term with the double meaning of the Greek word) and adds to this with a note: "The Greek word can also mean 'again'; but while putting the emphasis on divine origin John in no way rules out the second meaning." In fact we could quite legitimately prefer the second meaning, "again", because the reply of Nicodemus in verse 4 fits this meaning very well (see GNB's translation of this verse: " 'How can a grown man be born again?' Nicodemus asked. 'He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time!' ") However the other interpretation should not be excluded and it ought to appear in a note (which is what the GNB does for verse 3), since it is a feature of John's style to play on the double meaning of a word in this way. Some other examples will show this further.

In the same chapter of John (chapter 3), at verse 8, there is the well-known play on words on the Greek word *pneuma* which means both "wind" and "spirit". This same play on words is also possible in Hebrew with the corresponding term *ruah* which can have the same two meanings. In English or French, however, it is necessary to use two different words to refer to "wind" and "spirit". And that is why it is necessary to explain the word-play in a note in these two languages, as well as in many others.

In other places, John seems also to suggest two possible interpretations of the one word, as when he uses the Greek verb which may be translated "to be lifted up" (3.14; 8.28; 12.32): in effect he intends this verb to be taken as meaning at the same time both the lifting up of Jesus on the cross and his being raised up to glory. This last example is interesting because it does not cause any problem for translation in either French or English—it is possible to

suggest the same two ideas which are in the Greek simply by the translation *être élevé* or “to be lifted up”.

However the translator should not make the mistake of trying to explain the double meaning in the text; otherwise he would be betraying the author of the gospel, who likes to play on ambiguities of meaning like this. The only proper solution is to draw the reader’s attention to this aspect of John’s style in a note, as is done in TOB: “Jesus would be ‘lifted up’ on the cross which would become the place and the symbol of his exaltation into glory . . . John seems to enjoy using expressions which can be taken in more than one sense” (referring to 3.14).

In the Old Testament we often meet plays on words. And only rarely can we render these by equivalent plays on words in the language we are translating into. Often the word plays concern points which come out of proper names (of people or places). At the beginning of the book of Ruth, we find that when Naomi returns from Moab, she asks not to be called Naomi any longer, but Marah, that is to say “bitter”. The GNB solves the problem of expressing the meaning here by putting the names Naomi and Marah in the text, with a footnote which says: “Naomi . . . Marah: In Hebrew Naomi means ‘pleasant’ and Marah means ‘bitter’.” In the current French translation the necessary information has been introduced into the text: “Naomi said to her: Don’t call me Naomi, the Happy One, any longer, but call me Marah, the Afflicted One; because Almighty God has afflicted me severely.” (Translated back into English, from Ruth 1.20.) We could also mention the case of the name of Jacob which is linked in Hebrew both with the word which means “heel” and with the verb which means “to cheat” (Gen 25.26 and 27.36). In both these cases the GNB gives an appropriate note.

We could quote many more examples of this type in the Bible. The essential thing here is that in dealing with them it is necessary to make a careful study of the source text, so that the intentional nature of the ambiguity is confirmed by the immediate context or by the linguistic habits of the author (as in the case of John). There are in fact two mistakes to avoid in this area:

1. To try to harmonize two texts which relate to two different contexts simply because the same word is found in each. (This is the danger in “parallel” Bibles, in which the parallels are too often based on the use of a word in common, when the word may be used in two different senses according to the different contexts.)
2. To refer back to existing translations (of the literal type) and to say that there is an ambiguity in the text, when the ambiguity does not really exist in the original, but is due to poor translation technique.

Conclusion

To sum up, when people talk about the need to respect the ambiguities of the text, it is important to state the problem correctly.

We must take care to distinguish the different cases which present themselves, and to find an appropriate solution for each one. And we should take into account the following points which have been discussed in the course of this article:

1. Is it a case of an ambiguity which was really intended by the author? Or is it an obscurity in the text caused by our linguistic and cultural distance from the biblical world or by ignorance of the details of a situation known to the author and his first readers?
2. Many obscurities, or apparent ambiguities, can be resolved with the help of the context (too often they exist in a translation because of the habit of dealing with the text verse by verse, instead of rendering a verse in the context of a whole paragraph). When the context is not sufficient to remove the obscurity, good commentaries enable us to choose one well-founded interpretation and to give any other possible interpretation in a note.
3. When an ambiguity is clearly intended by the author, it will be necessary to find out first whether we can find an equivalent ambiguity in the language we are translating into (as in the case of a play on words, for example). If this is not the case (and it will not be possible very often), it will then be necessary to use a note to explain the intention of the author of the original text.

The translator who, through failure to recognize the real nature of the problems we have discussed here, remains obscure in many places, may perhaps be appreciated by preachers who like to be able to say whatever they like about any text! But he will assuredly be unfaithful to the intention of the biblical authors who had an important message to communicate to their readers and who wanted to be understood for the good of those readers.

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TRANSLATING BIBLICAL FESTIVALS

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There were a number of festivals celebrated by the people of Israel which are referred to in the Bible. These festivals were primarily occasions for the people to come together to worship God and to present special offerings and sacrifices to him. Traditionally they are called "feasts", but "feast" would be a misleading translation for two reasons: (1) "Feast" puts emphasis on eating and drinking, but "festival" puts emphasis on the celebration itself. (2) Some of these festivals (the Day of Atonement for instance) are not "feasts" but "fasts", that is, they are occasions for abstaining from food and drink.

Seven of the festivals are associated with the number 7. The Sabbath was the seventh day, and was the most important day for the Jews. The seventh month was also a very important month, the first day of which was celebrated as a holy day and was sometimes known as the "New Year Festival" (GNB) or "Festival of Trumpets", since trumpets were blown on that day (Num 29.1, Lev 23.23). The seventh year was known as the "Sabbatical Year", during which time the land was not be cultivated at all, nor the vineyards pruned (Lev 25.1-7, Deut 15.1-10). "Jubilee Year" was the 50th year, which was the year after seven times seven (Lev 25.8-55, 27.17-24). The "Festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread" began 14 days (7 times 2) after the first month. The "Feast of Weeks" or "Pentecost" was 7 times 7 days after Passover. The