

STYLE IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

Style in literature may be considered from various points of view. First, it is the characteristic flavour of a work deriving from the selection and arrangement of the elements of language. Then it is a reflection of period, place and circumstance which called it into being. Above all, it is the communication of the writer's personality through his work. In all this there is a tension between the free choice of the author, and the limitations imposed by subject-matter, medium and context.

Some features of style may be analysed and reproduced; others are less tangible, but may be appreciated through training, intuition and experience. There is a numinous element in all great art, which may become a source of inspiration for those who contemplate it. This factor is of importance to the Bible translator. It is elusive, but where it operates helps to ensure the effectiveness of a translation, and distinguishes the best renderings from those which are merely competent. The question then arises, is style something which can be studied, taught and reproduced? Or is it so undefinable that one has to rely on the intuitions and experience of the individual translator?

Some features of style can and should be taught; much of the translator's competence will depend on the totality of his culture and education; but beyond this is an inspirational element, his own special talents, which are the gift of God.

Style in a Literary Document

We do not intend to suggest what is good literary style: but we can indicate some aspects of analysis and appreciation which may help towards its discovery:

1. The document can be described in general terms, as to its purpose, content and form.
2. Linguistic elements may be examined for style: selection and use of vocabulary; structure and arrangement of sentences.
3. Figures of speech can be studied: mechanical, such as assonance, rhyme, sound symbolism; and the more extended forms such as simile, metaphor, allusion and the like.
4. The genre must be recognized, with its constituent parts, and how far the writer has handled it freely or conventionally. In longer forms, there may be changes of style from one part to another.
5. Organic aspects of style can next be dealt with. The context of place, time, social milieu, occasion, purpose and subject matter will impose certain characteristics on the writing. In some cases the character of the persons mentioned in the text will have their influence; again sometimes editing by other hands than the author's will need to be considered.

6. Most important of all, some assessment has to be made of how the writer's personality is made evident through his work.

Style in the Bible

To analyse the style of the Bible in detail according to the methods we have suggested would be subject matter for many volumes. All we do here is to note the variety of styles in the text of Scripture due to the numerous documents written by many hands over a long period of time. Nevertheless we also observe some measure of stylistic unity which distinguishes the Bible from other books, and this we attribute to its divine inspiration, and its constant and universal theme. The question is whether any such unity is sufficiently definite as to permit analysis, and transmission through translation.

We will give a single illustration to suggest the kind of problems which need investigation: the style of Jesus' speech, as recorded in the Gospels. To understand this would help us to know more deeply the manner in which both the divine and the human natures in Christ found expression in words; if we succeed in this, we may hope to convey more truly and more vividly the living Christ through the medium of a translation. But our record is limited in various ways: Jesus is believed normally to have spoken Aramaic, while the Gospels are written in Greek; the extent of the material is not great; it is seen through the eyes of the Evangelists; and in some cases, particularly in St John's Gospel, it is difficult to be sure exactly where the quotation of Jesus' words ends and the Evangelist's meditation begins.

Is it possible to analyse Jesus' style in detail, and what conclusions can we draw from it? Here we cover ground already trodden by the form critics; we do not need to commit ourselves to the theological conclusions of that school, but we can still use their methods in so far as they provide techniques useful in translation. It should be possible to build up a detailed analysis of Jesus' style from a study of the vocabulary, sentence structure, choice of subject matter, illustration and figures of speech, and categorize it as dialogue, parable, discourse, aphorism and so on, and to use this information to help both to vary and to control the stylistic features of a new translation.

Style in translation

An original document is a piece of given material, unique, and relatively fixed. The translator has to take not only this into account, but also the needs of the new readers, who differ not only in language from the original, but also in time, place, circumstance and culture. This means that in a translation, a second series of stylistic features are imposed, and their character is determined by the purpose and readership for which it is destined.

The truth of this may be seen by the great differences in style among contemporary English versions of the Scriptures, according to the aims of the various translators and their own personal idioms. Further stylistic traits may be due to the particular theory of translation in vogue at the time, as to whether close or free renderings are preferred.

The translator's responsibility is first to see how far he can apprehend, preserve and transmit the style of the original; and then to decide what

stylistic adaptations are necessary, or permissible, to meet the needs of the new readers.

Bible Versions

In the early nineteenth century one widely accepted view was that the Scriptures were delivered by God more or less verbatim through the passive agency of the writers. The result of this was that fidelity to the words of the original was perhaps the overriding principle of translation. It was however modified by the character of the classical education and culture which was the common background of the translators. Apart from the general sensitivity to their task which this culture ensured, its emphasis on literary analysis and appreciation provided a tool of direct relevance to translation. Moreover, many of the early versions were in the great literary languages of Asia, and for these, a classical education provided a germane and enlightening introduction. The main limitation was that the work was in the hands of missionaries, not nationals, and hence they were foreign translations, not made by men into their own mother tongues.

Changes in education and culture mean that a background of Latin and Greek can no longer be assumed as the common ground of potential translators. The technological aspects of modern civilization have an increasing influence over language and literature, and utilitarian standards tend to replace aesthetic ones. The study of language itself tends to become a technical science rather than a cultural process, and there are tensions between the older and newer approaches to language and literature.

One feature of contemporary society which must affect Bible translation is mass communication. Journalism, the cinema, wireless and television all have greater impact today than the more traditional forms of literature. This gives a new force and status to colloquial as against literary language. It undoubtedly encourages a new type of urban semi-illiteracy. This, at any rate in part, underlies the demand for new popular translations of the Scriptures, and their publication in journalistic format.

The contemporaneous demands for the revision of the old mission versions in many major languages, and for the publication of pioneer translations in many tribal languages have both introduced new stylistic trends. In India, for instance, national scholars seek to produce more truly indigenous versions. Not only are they working in their own mother tongues, but they are influenced by the general trends in language and literature in their own area. If they succeed in producing versions which are more in harmony with the stylistic traditions of their own literature, at least one good result should be to make the Bible more acceptable reading for non-Christians.

In the tribal versions, other considerations are more to the fore. In many cases, Scripture portions are the first written literature to be published in the language. Their influence is likely to be not only religious, but also linguistic and literary. The Bible translator is often setting standards for a new literary tradition, and so has a special responsibility to ensure that good style is achieved. If the translator is himself a missionary he cannot go to an existing literature to look for help; nor has he the right to impose alien modes of

thought and expression which belong to him, but not to the tribe, nor to the Scripture text. Linguistics will help him to bridge the gap, and increase his sensitivity; but in this context, the principal key is anthropology. This is a subject over which many Christian workers have felt some reserve; yet a Christian anthropology is indispensable for the promotion of successful Scripture translation in tribal languages. The implications of this need to be fully understood and accepted by those concerned with the evangelization of tribal peoples.

Conclusions

We believe that detailed and technical attention to style is one way by which standards of translation should be improved. This involves research into the stylistic aspects of the Biblical text; the drawing up of canons of style to be used in the assessment of translation manuscripts; and the inclusion of stylistics as a formal subject in the training of translators.

BINDING CASES

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AFRIQUE ET PAROLE is a cyclostyled magazine issued four times a year by the Centre Culturel Saint Dominique, b.p. 5098, Dakar, Sénégal. No. 14, dated December 1965, contains articles on the principles of translation, initiation rites and one part of a practical introduction to phonemic analysis. The publication would be helpful to anyone working in French speaking areas particularly in Africa.