

## REPETITION AND SYNONYMS IN THE TRANSLATION OF JOEL—WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE AMHARIC LANGUAGE

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In the short book of Joel there is an unusual number of synonyms, and repetitions of words, phrases, and ideas.

Repetitions are used for various functions. In many cases repetition is used to emphasize a point in oral or written literature. It may also be used to modify the area of meaning explained by one word or a phrase. In some languages repetition is simply a type of stylistic device, and this is very common in Hebrew literature, both prose and poetry.

### Some examples in Joel

In the book of Joel the great devastation of plants and crops caused by the locust plague and the drought is expressed by many repetitions and synonymous expressions. For instance in chapter 1 we find the following repetitions:

1.5 . . . it (the wine) *is cut off* from your mouth.

1.9 The cereal offering and the drink offering *are cut off*.

1.16 Is not the food *cut off* before our eyes . . . ?

All these repetitions of the phrase *cut off* are used to emphasize the unusual destruction of the crops. Similarly we have “laid waste” and “failed” repeated twice for the same purpose:

1.7 It has *laid waste* my vines . . .

1.10 The fields are *laid waste*,  
the ground mourns;  
because the grain is destroyed,  
the wine *fails*,  
the oil languishes.

1.17 . . . because the grain *has failed*.

In the same way we find plenty of synonyms or related words and expressions to emphatically explain a point. For instance, refer to the following verse:

1.7 It *has laid waste* my vines,  
and *splintered* my fig trees;  
it *has stripped* off their bark and *thrown it* down;  
their branches *are made white*.

The five verbs all explain one reality, the total destruction of the fruit plants by the invading locusts. This fact, however, could have been explained with one or two verbs or expressions only. The description of the destruction of the plants by so many synonyms or related verbs is for emphasis. It may not be possible to describe this view with so many synonyms in other languages. GNB, for instance, explains the incident in only four synonymous verbs instead of five.

When in the latter part of the book Joel gives promises of the end of the locusts and of the drought, he repeats four times the restoration of fertility of the land.

- 2.19 Behold, I am sending to you  
grain, wine, and oil,  
and you will be satisfied . . .
- 2.22 Fear not, you beasts of the field,  
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;  
the tree bears its fruit,  
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.
- 2.24 The threshing floors shall be full of grain,  
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
- 3.18 (Hebrew 4.18) And in that day  
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,  
and the hills shall flow with milk . . .

Similarly we find a number of synonyms in the following text:

- 2.2 a day of darkness and gloom  
a day of clouds and thick darkness!

The four synonyms—darkness and gloom, clouds and thick darkness—are used to emphasise the darkness of the day of the Lord which is a symbol of the destructive aspect of the day of God's final judgment.

We also find in Joel repeated references to the judgement of the Lord as “a day” and “the day of the Lord”.

- 1.15 Alas *for the day!*  
For *the day of the Lord is near.*
- 2.1 . . . for *the day of the Lord is coming, it is near.*
- 2.2 *a day of darkness and gloom*  
*a day of clouds and thick darkness.*
- 2.11 For *the day of the Lord is great and very terrible;*  
*who can endure it?*

Also the approach of God's final judgement is made vivid by many synonymous expressions such as:

- 3.2 I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. (In Hebrew Jehoshaphat means ‘God has judged’.)  
I will enter into judgement with them there . . .
- 3.12 . . . I will sit to judge all the nations round about.
- 3.14 Multitudes, multitudes,  
in the valley of decision!  
For the day of the Lord is near  
in the valley of decision.

In addition to the number of synonymous expressions referring to the judgement of the Lord, in 3.14 we have “multitudes” and “in the valley of decision” each repeated twice. The repetition of the word “multitudes” is to emphasize the large number of the people to be gathered. But for many languages such a repetition does not convey this idea. So the Amharic

Common Language translation has rendered the phrase as “a great number of people”. Similarly the repetition of the phrase “in the valley of decision” does not sound natural in many languages. Amharic Common Language Translation, like GNB, has replaced the second occurrence of the phrase with “there”.

The invasion of the locusts is also described by many synonyms and related words of motion such as “come up” (1.6), “run” (2.4,9), “leap” (2.5,9), “charge”, “scale” and “march” (2.7), “burst through” (2.8) and “enter” (2.9). The destructive nature of the locusts is emphasized by repeating the word “powerful” four times (1.6, 2.2,5,11).

Joel three times closes a section by repeating a leading and significant phrase of that section to emphasize the main theme. Thus, at the close of 1.20 he repeats the clause of verse 19 “fire has devoured the pasture of the wilderness”. Here he tries to emphasize the main theme of verses 17-20, namely, the devastation of vegetation by drought. Similarly, he closes 2.27 with “And my people shall never again be put to shame”, an exact repetition of the last clause of the preceding verse (26). The repetition reassures God’s promise that he will dwell among the people of Israel as before, and that they will not be put to shame among the nations or will never be so punished again. In the same way, the last clause of 3.21 “the Lord dwells in Zion” is a repetition of an identical clause “who dwell in Zion” of 3.17. However, when repetitions are so close together as in 1.19 and 20; 2.26 and 27, it may be stylistically poor or unnatural for receptor languages. In such languages the repetition may be omitted. The AmCL rendered the repetition in 1.20 with a slight restructuring, but in 2.27 it repeated the exact words of verse 26 and this does sound stylistically poor.

### Translation problems with repetitions and synonyms

Very often repetitions and synonyms create serious translation problems. Translators usually find that there is only one term or word for a particular concept in their language, while the original language has several synonyms for that concept. For instance, in Joel we have the following synonyms in the original to describe the deep sorrow of the people because of the devastation caused by a locust invasion and drought:

- 1.5 Awake, you drunkards, and *weep*;  
and *wail*, all you drinkers of wine . . .
- 1.12 return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with *weeping* and with *mourning*
- 1.13 *Gird on sackcloth* and *lament*, O priests,  
*wail*, O ministers of the altar.  
Go in, *pass the night in sackcloth*,  
O ministers of my God!

In this passage we have six synonymous verbs and phrases, **weep**, **wail**, **lament**, **mourning**, **gird on sackcloth** and **pass the night in sackcloth**, all of which express only one concept, the deep sorrow of the people. But many languages including Amharic have only one or two terms to express that concept. The

Amharic Common Language translation (AmCL) tries to use two verbs, *alekese* (“weep”) and *azene* (“feel grieved”). But the second verb is very weak and does not have all the components of meaning of the six expressions in the original. It would be sufficient to use only the first verb, *alekese*, (“weep”) in Amharic. There may indeed be quite a few languages that have only one word or phrase for a concept which has several synonyms in the original language. In such cases, it would indeed spoil the translation if we tried to find synonyms in these languages for that concept.

In 1.13 above there are three other synonymous terms, namely “priests”, “ministers of the altar” and “ministers of my God”, all of which refer to the one group of people who serve God in the temple. The AmCL, like GNB, used only one term with an adjectival clause, “you priests who serve the altar”, but it reduced the three parallels of the original to two.

Translators in some languages may be confronted with translation problems in dealing with the description of the terrible devastation caused by the locusts, as stated in 1.4:

What the cutting locust left,  
 the swarming locust has eaten.  
 What the swarming locust left,  
 the hopping locust has eaten,  
 and what the hopping locust left,  
 the destroying locust has eaten.

Here the Hebrew uses four names for the locusts, *gāzām*, *arbeh*, *yeleq*, and *ḥasil*, and RSV translates the meaning of these names as “cutting locust”, “swarming locust”, “hopping locust” and “destroying locust”. The literal translations of these terms are cutter, swarmer, hopper or lapper, and destroyer or finisher. There is indeed serious question regarding the four designations for the locusts. Are the four names applied to four distinct species of locusts or to four different stages in the development of the life cycle of the same species? Or have four successive hordes of the same species swept across the land progressively devouring the vegetation? Most commentators believe that the four names do not refer either to four different stages of the one locust or to four distinct species of locusts. “The four names given to the locusts . . . are not the names applied in natural history” (Keil and Delitzsch). Most probably the four names of the locusts are local names intended to denote four successive hordes of the same species sweeping across the country in a short period of time. It is also believed that the four terms are used to describe the completeness of the devastation effected. In the Hebrew four is the number of completeness (see Is 11.12, Jer 15.3, Ezek 5.5,6). Evidently Hebrew is richer than other languages in synonyms for locusts, and the four names are possibly synonymous. Amharic and possibly many other languages cannot refer to this creature in four different words as the Hebrew does. In all four cases AmCL, following RSV almost literally, used only one term for the locusts but with four descriptive phrases. GNB rightly emphasizing the successive attack of one swarm of locusts after another of the same species renders the verse as “Swarm

after swarm of locusts settled on the crops . . .” and greatly reduced the repetitions.

- 1.14 Sanctify a fast,  
       call a solemn assembly.  
 Gather the elders  
       and all the inhabitants of the land . . .

Here the prophet continues to summon the priests not only to mourn and do penance themselves but to proclaim a universal fast and to call all the people together to do national humiliation and penitence. “Sanctify . . .” is a Hebrew expression which denotes a setting aside of a time or thing or person for a solemn purpose by solemn ceremonies. This expression cannot easily be rendered into other languages. We find similar expressions with the same verb “sanctify” in three other places of the book. **Sanctify a fast** (1.14, 2.15) means “set aside for God a time of fasting”. GNB translates the clause as “Give orders for a fast”. AmCL renders it as “Proclaim a fast”, an expression which is very common in church circles.

**Call a solemn assembly** and **gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land . . .** are two synonymous expressions which in some languages can be reduced to one, to avoid repetition if their style requires it. We find similar repetitions in 2.15–16.

- 2.1 Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
       sound the alarm on my holy mountain;

These two lines are parallel and synonymous. The two clauses, **Blow the trumpet** and **sound the alarm** have an identical meaning. Similarly, **Zion** and **holy mountain** are synonymous designations denoting not two places but one. In this text holy mountain is another name for Zion. If the two phrases “in Zion” and “on my holy mountain”, are rendered literally as in the original, it is most probably that readers would be confused and think that two places are meant here. The translation should not sound as if they are two different places. To avoid such misunderstanding AmCL following GNB puts “my holy mountain” in apposition to “Zion”.

- 2.3 Fire devours before them,  
       and behind them a flame burns.

In this verse RSV has literally retained the metaphor of the Hebrew. The two lines given above are parallel and synonymous. In 1.19 **fire** is a metaphor for the scorching drought but here **fire** and **flame** are used as figures for the invading locusts to describe their destructive nature. For clarity and to avoid any possible misunderstanding AmCL following GNB has changed the metaphor into a simile but has retained the parallel statements. “Devoured” is a metaphor for burning things completely. AmCL has rendered this verb as “ate”; but this figure of speech is not common among many Amharic speakers and particularly among those who use Amharic as a second language. This may be true with many other languages, and therefore a more natural expression should be found in the translation. It is interesting to note that in 1.19 and 2.5 where “devour” is used AmCL used another word “burn” which is more natural.

2.7 Like warriors they charge,  
like soldiers they scale the wall.

The above two lines are parallel, and the two words, **warriors** and **soldiers** are synonymous. AmCL, like the GNB has retained the parallel; but some languages may have only one word for these synonymous words. To make the concept of the verse easily understood the two synonymous words (**warriors** and **soldiers**) may be reduced to one and consequently the two parallel clauses may be restructured and reduced to one clause using a qualifier as:

“Like powerful soldiers they attack and climb the walls.”

Or the order of actions may be reversed as:

“Like powerful soldiers they climb the walls and attack.”

2.16 “Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her chamber.”

Here **his room** and **her chamber** do not refer to different places or rooms in a house. They are parallel and both refer to the nuptial chamber, the innermost part of the house where the privacy of the couples was insured. Accordingly the two words are combined to one in the AmCL and the GNB.

In 2.21 and 23 we find a pair of synonyms—**be glad and rejoice** repeated twice in contrast to 1.16 where **joy and gladness** (two more synonyms) had gone away from the people because of the devastation of the crops wrought by locusts and drought. GNB has retained the pair of synonyms as acceptable English style. AmCL also retained the synonyms in both cases, but this does not sound good in Amharic. In fact the second verb sounds very strange and foreign, as it is borrowed from Geez, an old language of Ethiopia. Interestingly the two similar synonymous nouns (joy and gladness) in 1.16 are reduced to one. Therefore, Amharic and some other languages may have to reduce the two synonymous verbs (be glad and rejoice) to the single verb.

2.28,29 . . . I will pour out my spirit . . .

This expression is repeated twice in these two verses, probably to mark a climax. The expression is used here figuratively to emphasize that God gives his spirit in great abundance. In some languages including Amharic, however, it does not sound natural to speak of a spirit being poured out. In such cases natural expression should be explored in these languages.

2.28 Your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.

To **dream dreams** and to **see visions** are almost synonymous and refer to similar experience. They are ways of receiving divine revelation. But in many languages it is indeed difficult to distinguish between dreams and visions. Actually there is a slight difference between the two in that dreams usually occur when a person is asleep while visions occur when a person is awake. In such circumstances and specially when there is only one term for both experiences, it may be possible to combine the two clauses. AmCL used two terms, but the term for vision is an unknown word borrowed from Geez.

In 3.1 there are two synonymous phrases—**in those days** and **at that time**. Both phrases refer to the period of Israel's restoration. GNB, GeCL and AmCL have avoided the redundancy by retaining only one phrase—"at that time".

3.2 . . . on account of my people and my heritage Israel . . .

**My people** and **my heritage** are two synonymous noun phrases both of which refer to the people of Israel as God's chosen people. In Amharic and many other languages it is very difficult and unnatural to use the word heritage to mean people. In many languages heritage usually means something (very often fortunes) handed down from ancestors. But in the Bible, mostly in the Old Testament, we find the people of Israel spoken of as God's heritage or inheritance. This expression is used to emphatically indicate the close and intimate relationship between God and the people of Israel (see also Dt 9.26, 29, 1 Kg 8.51, 53). If such an expression cannot be used in some languages, some other suitable expressions which can convey the true meaning of the original should be found. GNB, GeCL and AmCL have reduced the two synonyms to a single phrase, "my people".

3.9 Stir up the mighty men.

Let all the men of war **draw near**  
let them **come up**.

**Draw near** and **come up** are two expressions which are almost synonymous. They are regular terms used to explain an army's approach to attack in a battle. RSVs "come up" may be misunderstood to mean moving from lower to higher place; but this is not the meaning in this context. It means here "attack". (Compare the two terms in Jdg 6.3, 20.23.) AmCL has reduced the two terms to a single term, "march for battle".

Also the two synonymous noun phrases, **mighty men** and **men of war**, could be reduced to a single phrase or noun if necessary.

3.16 And the Lord roars from Zion,  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem,  
and the heavens and the earth shake,  
But the Lord is a refuge to his people,  
a stronghold to the people of Israel.

The first two lines of the verse are parallel expressing the same idea. In these two lines there are two pairs of synonyms, **roars** and **utters his voice** on the one hand, and **Zion** and **Jerusalem** on the other. In this context both "roars" and "utters his voice" are figurative expressions which indicate God's anger and his threat of punishment. In some languages it may not be possible to apply the roaring of a lion and the sound of thunder to a human being. The problem may be solved by changing the metaphor to a simile.

Similarly **Zion** and **Jerusalem** are parallel indicating the same place. Zion is just another name for Jerusalem. Both GNB and AmCL retain the two names; but this may confuse readers who may think that two different places are meant here.

The last two lines are also parallel and synonymous, with **refuge** and **stronghold** having almost the same components of meaning and expressing the same concept. Both of them are metaphors of God's protection. GNB has combined the two into a single verb "He will **defend** his people." Similarly the two synonymous and parallel noun phrases "the people of Israel" and "his people" are combined to "his people" by GNB.

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## A NEW LOOK AT SECTION HEADINGS IN WEST AFRICAN TRANSLATIONS

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"My tribespeople, do not cause your brother to fall into sin. I repeat, do not cause your brother to fall into sin. This is the word that God is asking you to hear today. Let it bite your ears well, because it is so important that the blackness of its letters surpasses that of all the words before and after it."

The village preacher, a man who had only recently learnt to read, had just read his text as the last part of Rom 14.12, which reads "everyone of us, then, will have to give an account of himself to God. **Do not cause your brother to fall into sin.**" He then proceeded to give a stirring message. If you consult an English, French, or German common language translation, you will find that the "black letter" portion is really the section heading for Rom 14.12-23. While the African preacher's message was not at odds with the teaching of the Scriptures, this experience points out an important shortcoming of the present section headings in many African Bibles. We all agree, of course, that the newly literate pastor failed to recognize the "black print" as the bold-face section heading for the following section: but there is more to it than this, and it is this *more* that is the concern of this article, namely that our current pattern of section headings often lacks the particular markers for titles or headings that are required in our languages. As a result section headings are often being read, and even more often being understood, as part of the text itself.

### The development of our current section headings

When we look back over the past twenty years we find that we have made tremendous progress in regard to moving translators from translating literally the nominal title forms that characterize English and French section headings, and to express these headings in full simple sentence statements. For instance *the transfiguration* (Mt 17.1) has become "Jesus changes his appearance completely". There is no question that such full-sentence section headings help the reader to understand their meaning more easily, something which the traditional form seldom did. But in making the section heading a sentence which can easily be understood we have introduced a new problem for many of the hearers and readers, namely that the easily understood sentence is now felt to be part of the text, because the sentence lacks the necessary markers of a title in the African language.