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TRANSLATING BIBLICAL PROVERBS IN AFRICAN CULTURES: Between Form and Meaning¹

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Introduction

Translation is a difficult task. No one recognized this fact more clearly than Martin Luther, who once wrote:

I have undertaken to translate the Bible into German. This was necessary for me; otherwise I might have died someday imagining that I was a learned man. Those who think themselves scholars should try to do this work.²

Of all the books of the Old Testament, the translation of the book of Proverbs presents translators with especially difficult challenges because of the special qualities of proverbs. Proverbs are exquisitely crafted sayings in which minimal words are arranged for maximal effect. Seemingly simplistic proverbial statements serve to engage the hearer in reflection. Proverbs are shaped in such a way as to be memorable and persuasive, to encourage virtue and discourage vice, but they do so indirectly. Proverbial sayings, then, are multi-faceted linguistic expressions in which form and meaning intersect in complex ways. As a result, the translation of biblical proverbs must take into consideration form as well as meaning.

Translating the biblical proverbs into African languages involves possibilities and problems that are somewhat different from those encountered by translators of the Bible into English. On the one hand, African societies understand proverbs. African languages typically have hundreds, if not thousands, of proverbs, and Africans use proverbs extensively in their everyday life. Not only is speech sprinkled with proverbs, but in some areas, proverbs are printed on cloth, or painted on the backs of buses. Proverbs are everywhere. Furthermore, Africans understand the “logic” of proverbs—that proverbs mean considerably more than they explicitly say, and that a single proverb may appropriately be used in many different social contexts. In contrast, proverbs are in decline in American culture. Many people are unaware of traditional proverbs; others have no idea what they mean. Even those who are familiar with traditional proverbs are not likely to use them in everyday conversation. It is difficult to imagine any high school student describing a snobbish peer group by saying “Yes, well, birds of a feather flock together, don’t they?” But in Africa, proverbial

1 For all that I may know about translating the book of Proverbs into African languages, I am indebted to the mother-tongue translators of the Shilluk, Dinka Cam (i.e., Southern Dinka), Dinka Padang, Dinka Rek, Murle, and Jur Luwo translation projects. I am grateful to the Sudan Workshop Programme for its sponsorship of four translation courses on the book of Proverbs (1999-2002). For helpful discussion about the exegesis of biblical proverbs, I am indebted to Michael V. Fox. The writing of this paper was supported in part by research funds donated by the Ettinger Family Foundation to the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

2 Luther made this statement in a letter to Hartmut von Cronberg in 1522. The English translation is provided in Gustav K. Wiencke, ed., *Devotional Works II*, vol. 43 of *Luther’s Works* (ed. Helmut T. Lehman; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 70.

expressions are still very much alive, and as a result, biblical proverbs are particularly important and meaningful within an African context.

On the other hand, translating the biblical proverbs in African cultures involves particular difficulties. Some of these difficulties stem from the nature of proverbial sayings and general problems in translating them, but other problems stem from ways in which the biblical proverbs differ from African proverbs in structure and cultural context.

In this paper, I consider some of these difficulties in translating biblical proverbs in African cultures. I am especially interested in exploring some of the ways in which translation, if it is to be meaningful and effective, must take into account both form and meaning. Biblical scholars are well aware of the importance of considering both the form and the meaning of the biblical text within its ancient Israelite cultural context. A number of biblical scholars have described and catalogued the particular linguistic shapes of the various kinds of proverbs that are found in the Hebrew text of the book of Proverbs.¹ That is one half of the task of translation. In this paper, however, I will focus upon the other half of the task, namely, upon the intersection of form and meaning within the translated text of the book of Proverbs within African cultures.²

At the outset, I wish to acknowledge that I am not a translator of the Bible into any African language, nor am I fluent in an African language. My experience is rather as a translation consultant to Africans who are translating the Bible into their own mother tongues. My experience in translation is thus secondhand, through helping African translators to understand the meaning of the biblical text as they have grappled with the difficulties of translation that I will describe here. My experience is also limited geographically in that all of the examples are drawn from southern Sudanese languages belonging to the Nilo-Saharan language family. In the languages represented here, the translation of Proverbs must be adequate for use in remote villages that have little contact with the modern world, as well as for speakers who have migrated to urban areas. Speakers in rural villages generally have a greater repertoire of proverbial sayings and traditional wisdom, but their cultural knowledge is limited to their local area. Speakers in urban areas have greater exposure to the modern world, but may not know as many proverbial sayings from their traditional cultures. A translation of the book of Proverbs, then, must balance these differing kinds and degrees of cultural knowledge.

A Dinka proverb

In order to illustrate the difficulties inherent in the translation of Proverbs, I begin by attempting translation in the other direction—that is, by translating an African proverb into American English. The proverb is a traditional proverb from the Dinka people of Sudan:

1 See, e.g., Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature* (FOTL 13; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), and James G. Williams, "The Power of Form: A Study of Biblical Proverbs," *Semeia* 17 (1980): 35-58.

2 Golka is one author who has compared themes of African proverbs to biblical proverbs; see Friedemann W. Golka, *The Leopard's Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), esp. 36-110. However, Golka does not consider how the translation of Proverbs into African languages might be shaped by a consideration of the forms of African proverbs. Instead, his concern is to demonstrate that on the basis of proverbs in African societies, Israelite proverbs need not have originated in the royal court, scribal schools, or a special class of wisdom teachers.

*Røkë ran acë cïr røkë koou.*¹

A fence of people is not a fence of thorns.

The translation is literal, but the meaning of every word and the meaning of the sentence as a whole are quite clear in English. But do English speakers know what the proverb means? Could they paraphrase it? More importantly, would they feel compelled to take a particular course of action after hearing this proverb? Although the English translation is perfectly grammatical, the meaning and thrust of the proverb are completely opaque to English speakers.

The proverb is shaped as a comparison between two kinds of fences—a fence of people and a fence of thorns. A fence of thorns is not known in the U.S., though it is possible to guess at what it is—a fence made from thorn bushes. What is not clear, however, is the cultural knowledge of where a thorn fence is used or what purpose it serves within a Dinka village. There, a thorn fence is a common way to fence a family's living space—it serves as an environmentally-friendly barbed wire fence. In contrast, the meaning of a "fence of people" is less transparent, because the phrase is a metaphor for neighbors. Thus, a first approximation of the meaning of the proverb is:

Neighbors who live around you are not like the fence of thorns that surrounds your compound.

Several pieces of information are still lacking for a complete understanding of the proverb. First, the proverb makes a comparison between two kinds of fences, and states that they are not equivalent. But which fence is the better, or more preferred? The relative value of the two kinds of fences would be clear to Africans. Ordinarily the proverb is used in contexts where it is used to indicate that the fence of neighbors is superior to the fence of thorns. Secondly, and more importantly, there is implicit cultural information that is embedded within the proverb concerning the function of thorn fences—thorn fences are used to keep out thieves. With this cultural information, we can make a second approximation of the meaning of the proverb:

Neighbors who live around you provide better protection from thieves than a thorn fence.

A final component of the proverb is its pragmatic function. What behavior does the proverb encourage or discourage? What kind of situations would warrant the use of this proverb?² From an American point of view, we might guess that the point of the proverb is to encourage people to trust their neighbors. Since the proverb states that neighbors provide better security than thorn fences, perhaps the proverb is urging people to tear down the physical barriers that divide them. But this is not at all the thrust of the proverb. A thorn fence is the cultural equivalent of the locks on doors in America; no Dinka family would consider having a compound without a fence. Rather, in its most basic use, the focus of the proverb is

1 Citations in African languages are represented using their own indigenous orthographies rather than the International Phonetic Alphabet.

2 Norrick suggests that proverbs have a customary meaning, which he calls the "standard proverbial interpretation." However, because proverbs generate implicatures, they may be used for many pragmatic purposes. An essential pragmatic function is the potential use of a proverb for direct or indirect didactic purposes. See Neal R. Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic Studies in English Proverbs* (Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 27; Berlin: Mouton, 1985), 1, 27, 42-43.

on the value of maintaining good relations with neighbors, because good neighbors enhance the security of the family beyond that of an ordinary thorn fence. In terms of pragmatic function, the proverb could be used to convey the following exhortation:

You should maintain good relations with the neighbors who live around you because they provide protection from thieves that is superior to a thorn fence.

However, the proverb can also be used in a much broader sense to comment on the importance of the community. It could be spoken, e.g., to subtly rebuke someone who is an individualist by reminding him/her that he/she is a part of a communal society. But there are many other social contexts within which the proverb could be spoken, and many other pragmatic functions which the proverb could serve. In using a proverb, a speaker implies that there is an analogy or comparison to be drawn between the proverb and the current speech situation. The speaker expects the hearer to infer the speaker's didactic use of the proverb.¹

So far we have seen that understanding the proverb requires us to consider three interlocking kinds of meaning.² The first kind of meaning involves the words and concepts conveyed in the proverb, the "denotational meaning."³ This is the most basic level of meaning. At this level, we needed to determine that a "fence of thorns" denotes a literal fence around a compound, and we needed to understand that the "fence of people" is a metaphor denoting neighbors. Although crucial, this level of meaning was ultimately inadequate for a complete understanding of the proverb.

A second level of meaning involves the cultural connotations and implications of the proverb. We needed cultural understanding in order to understand that the function of a "fence of thorns" is to provide protection for a family and its possessions against thieves. We also needed cultural understanding in order to know what relative value to place on the fence of thorns as opposed to the fence of people.

A third level of meaning involves the pragmatic functions of the proverb, that is, what a speaker who uses the proverb intends to accomplish.⁴ The pragmatic function of the Dinka proverb draws upon the meaning of words and the cultural

1 See the discussion of Kalter, who provides an anthropological linguistic description of the process by which a hearer understands the speaker's didactic thrust in uttering a proverb (Marjorie Hope Kalter, "Oral Literature and Metaphorical Translation," *Language and Style* 13 [1980]: 55-63, esp. 57-59).

2 Native speakers have an additional task not described here. They must infer that a sentence should be understood as proverbial language, rather than an ordinary language. Similarly, English speakers who hear the question "Is the pope Catholic?" must first infer that no ordinary question has been posed; the speaker is not requesting information concerning the religious affiliation of the pope.

3 For an overview of lexical semantics and sentence meaning, see John Lyons, *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and esp. 78-79 on the concept of denotation.

4 The term "pragmatics" originated with Charles Morris, who described pragmatics as the study of the relation of signs to interpreters (Charles W. Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* [International Encyclopedia of Unified Science 1/2; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938], 6, 32-33). Since Morris coined the term, it has been used in a wide variety of ways, see Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-35.

In the discussion here, I am restricting the term "pragmatic function" to one use of the term, namely, speech as intentional, purposive, social behavior. The other main use of "pragmatic" refers to the relationship of the linguistic signal to its context of use. These two uses of the term "pragmatic" are described by Michael Silverstein, "The Three Faces of Function" in *Social and Functional Approaches to Language and Thought* (ed. Maya Hickman; New York: Academic, 1987), 17-38.

background, but it goes beyond them to extol or encourage the value of community as opposed to individualism.

As we have seen, understanding—really understanding—the proverb requires us to go beyond the denotational meanings of the words of the proverb to consider the implicit information known from Dinka culture, as well as the pragmatic functions of the proverb within Dinka society, generally, and within various contexts of speaking, specifically. This is the first half of the task of translation. Now we are ready to try to translate this African proverb into English.

We have already seen that a literal, word-for-word translation is inadequate in English:¹

A fence of people is not a fence of thorns.

It would not be possible for American readers to know what the proverb means without several explanatory paragraphs in a footnote.

A second option is to produce a fuller, more explicit translation that describes the cultural background of the proverb as well as its most basic pragmatic function:

You should maintain good relations with the neighbors who live around you because they provide protection from thieves that is superior to a thorn fence.

Although this statement accurately conveys the nuances of the original, it does not sound like a proverb in English and thus it could not function as a proverb in American society. English proverbs are usually short and concise, and contain some kind of quasi-poetic features such as similar sound patterns, repetition, and rhythm.² For example, the traditional proverb “A stitch in time saves nine” depends upon the near rhyme of “time” and “nine.” If we substitute another number, the proverb is ruined—“A stitch in time saves six” does not work as a proverb. Similarly, the more contemporary proverb “No pain, no gain” depends upon repetition of the word “no” and the rhyme of “pain” and “gain.”

Another important feature of English proverbs is their compactness. Notice what happens if the pragmatic meaning of the proverb “No pain, no gain” is explicitly stated:

You should be willing to invest your time, talents, energy, or resources in a proposed endeavour. If you do not, then you will not get any positive results from your efforts.

Although such an explanation makes explicit the cultural and pragmatic layers of

1 By “literal translation” is meant a translation which is “maximally close to the SL [source language] form, but nevertheless grammatical” (Andrew Chesteron, *Memes of Translation: The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory* [Benjamins Translation Library 22; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997], 94).

2 Norrick claims that poetic features (including phonological equivalences, prosody, and figuration) are an important component of English proverbs (Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean*, 46-51). Jakobson argues that much of the phonological and prosodic patterning in poetry (including proverbs and riddles) is spontaneous, intuitive, and subliminal; see Roman Jakobson, “Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry” in *Language in Literature* (ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 250-61, esp. 254-8.

meaning within the proverb, the result is not in itself a proverb.¹

So it is clear that in translating the Dinka proverb, a literal translation of the words would not communicate meaningfully in English. But a paraphrase that conveys all of the implicit information of the Dinka proverb is also problematic, because such a paraphrase cannot function as a proverb in English. No American household is going to be persuaded to patch things up with an offended neighbor on the basis of a statement such as:

Maintain good relations with the neighbors who live around you because they provide protection from thieves that is superior to the thorn fence that typically surrounds houses in Southern Sudan.

Instead, we want to look for a way to faithfully convey the meaning of the Dinka proverb in a way that has significance in America, which will sound to Americans like a proverbial statement so that the proverb can be used to compel the hearers to take appropriate action.² This task is exceedingly difficult. To begin with, since American houses do not rely on thorn fences for protection from thieves, we could substitute a cultural equivalent such as deadbolt locks. But the metaphor, “deadbolt neighbors,” based upon this cultural equivalent is awkward:

Deadbolt neighbors are not deadbolt locks.

Instead, we can use the explanatory phrase “good neighbors” to translate the proverb’s original metaphor “fence of people”:

Good neighbors provide better security than deadbolt locks.

All of the information of the original proverb is represented in a way that is meaningful in American culture, but the statement falls flat as a proverb—an American proverb must have rhyme or sound patterns. It is difficult to find a synonym for “good neighbors” that will rhyme with “deadbolt locks” (or another cultural equivalent such as “alarm systems”), so instead we can change the expression “good neighbors” to “neighbors’ eyes,” a vivid synecdoche of the protection provided by watchful neighbors. Now we can make a rhyming proverb:

Neighbors’ eyes beat thieving spies.

This has a nice sound to it (“eyes” rhymes with “spies”), but thieves are not really spies.³

A better option might be something like:

1 Murphy suggests that translations of biblical proverbs into English often fail as proverbs because the translators supply words to make complete English sentences. He notes that English proverbs are often elliptical (e.g., “a penny saved, a penny earned”). Similarly, a translation of Proverbs that retains the elliptical nature of the Hebrew will sound more like proverbs in English. Among the examples Murphy provides is “A lover of instruction, a lover of knowledge; but a hater of reproof, stupid” (Prov 12.1). See Roland E. Murphy, “A Brief Note on Translating Proverbs,” *CBQ* 60 (1998): 621-5.

2 Gutt, writing on translation from the standpoint of Relevance Theory, suggests that a proverb is stored in the mental lexicon both as a lexical unit and as an encyclopedic entry associated with it. Translation of a proverb, then, should involve not the transference of semantic meaning, but a holistic transfer of the proverb so as to reproduce the stimulus of the original. Thus, the correct translation of the German proverb *Man muss mit den Wölfen heulen* is not a transference of semantic meaning (“One must howl with the wolves”) but rather “When in Rome do as the Romans.” See Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 150-1.

3 Another rhyming (or perhaps, rapping) option is “Mending fences in the ‘hood makes security good.”

Mend fences. Thwart thieves.

The translation is succinct and pithy. It is structured in a way similar to the saying “no pain, no gain.” There are a couple of good sound patterns—the “s” sounds ending “fences” and “thieves” and the “th” sounds beginning “thwart” and “thieves.” Furthermore, the proverb incorporates American cultural knowledge—“mending fences” is not literal, but rather a metaphor for restoring relationships with neighbors. “Mending fences” thus serves as the functional equivalent of the “fence of people” and has the added advantage of retaining the metaphor of a fence from the original proverb. The cause and effect between the two sentences is clear, although the hearer must tease out the relationship between them—a good relationship with neighbors enhances security against thieves.¹

However, as we noted earlier, the use of the Dinka proverb is actually much broader than simply encouraging good relations with neighbors as a kind of “neighborhood watch.” Instead, the proverb can be spoken in any context for the purpose of discouraging individualism and encouraging community life.² A broader, and ultimately more accurate, translation, then, of the Dinka proverb might be:

Mend fences. Build community.

As in the original proverb, a metaphor involving fences is used to denote relationships with neighbors. The proverb is succinct and pithy, with each verb a single syllable ending in “d.” The two verbs “mend” and “build” suggest that repairing relationships results in enhanced community life. Like the original proverb, the translated proverb sounds like a proverb and could be used as a proverb in American society.

What we have seen so far is that translation involves multiple considerations. We begin with the semantics (denotational meaning) of the original proverb. Then we consider its cultural context and the implicit information that the proverb indirectly conveys. Finally, we consider the pragmatic functions of the proverb and its uses in society. Then we take everything that we know about the original proverb and look for a way to crystallize the content of the original proverb into a short, succinct, catchy proverb in the new language. We think about the cultural context and implications that the proverb will have in its new cultural setting. And finally, we think about whether the translated proverb will be able to function as a catalyst to encourage or discourage behavior.³

With this new appreciation for the difficulties of translating proverbs, we are ready to consider the possibilities and problems for translating biblical proverbs in East Africa.

1 Interestingly, the cultural values of American society are precisely opposite as witnessed by the proverb “Good fences make good neighbors.”

2 In its extended use, the proverb is functionally equivalent to the English proverb, “No man is an island” (as pointed out to me by Amoth Awan de Gak).

3 Murray Salisbury has provided a helpful, detailed description of the process of translating biblical proverbs into English with attention to the final shape of the proverb in English; see “Hebrew Proverbs and How to Translate Them” in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (ed. Robert D. Bergen; Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994), 434-61.

Possibilities and problems for translating biblical proverbs

Forms of proverbs in East Africa

Before African translators begin to translate biblical proverbs, it is instructive for them to reflect on traditional proverbs in their own languages. In courses on Proverbs, I asked the translators to write down a number of their proverbs and then together we looked at the ways in which their proverbs are structured, both with respect to form and meaning. As they examined their own proverbs, one translator suddenly said, "Our proverbs are very sharp." This was a crucial insight. What he meant is that their proverbs tend to be sparse, with a minimal number of words. As much information as possible is left implicit, thus forcing the hearer to draw the intended conclusions. Another important quality is that African proverbs use vivid imagery, especially metaphors and wordplay, to draw a picture of a situation to which the hearer should respond emotively.

To the extent that it is possible to translate biblical proverbs in ways that are sharp and use vivid imagery, Africans will be more likely to respond to them as proverbs.

Making the proverb "sharp"

Making the proverb "sharp" involves finding ways to express the meaning of the biblical proverb in the most condensed form. In the Hebrew, Prov 24.27 has three sentences:

Prov 24.27 (NIV)

Finish your outdoor work
and get your fields ready;
after that, build your house.

The Dinka Padang translators found a way to convey the meaning of the proverb in a much sharper way:

Prov 24.27 (Dinka Padang)

Take hoe, and build house.¹

In their culture, the single sentence "take hoe" is used to encompass agricultural work as a whole. All of the tasks involved in agriculture, including "getting the fields ready" and "finishing the outdoor work," are implicit within the expression. Anyone hearing the proverb readily draws the conclusion that agricultural work in its totality should be done first, before building a house. This is precisely the meaning of the Hebrew.

Although it would have been possible for the translators to use three sentences that precisely mimicked the Hebrew, the result would not have sounded like a proverb. By translating "take hoe, and build house," the translated proverb conveys all of the information of the Hebrew text, and it does so in a shape that sounds like a proverb. People in the community immediately accepted the translated proverb as "very sharp." More strikingly, they began using the proverb in their everyday speech. Shortly after this proverb was translated, a young man in

¹ *Löm pur ka yik röt.* Here and throughout, citations of African translations reflect drafts made during translation workshops. The published translations of Proverbs in these languages may differ from those presented here.

the community wanted to get married, even though he had no job and no money for the wedding or support of a wife. Someone said to him, “Take hoe and build house.” He got the point—he should take care of matters of sustenance before concerning himself with personal comforts.¹ The biblical proverb—because it *sounded* like a proverb—had entered the society. As a result, it could be used to convince an immature young man to pursue a mature course of action.

Using vivid imagery

African proverbs typically use vivid imagery, as we saw in our first example where “fence” is used as a metaphor for the surrounding community. One way to enhance the artfulness and hence the memorability of biblical proverbs is to employ figures of speech.

As an example, consider Prov 27.17:

Prov 27.17 (NJPS)

As iron sharpens iron
so a man sharpens the wit of his friend.²

In considering this proverb, the Shilluk translators found that in their culture “iron” has the connotation of raw material, not an implement that could sharpen something. They chose instead to substitute a specific iron implement in order to have a more powerful image:

Prov 27.17 (Shilluk)

A person learns from a person who walks with him like sharpening a spear with another spear.³

By substituting “spear” for “iron,” the proverb becomes more vivid, since it evokes a commonplace activity.

Another example involves Prov 23.23:

Prov 23.23 (RSV)

Buy truth, and do not sell it;
buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding.

The Hebrew proverb uses the verbs “buy” and “sell” as metaphors for acquiring the abstract qualities of truth, wisdom, discipline, and understanding, and refusing to part with them.⁴ The Luwo, however, found that they could not use “buy” and “sell” metaphorically with abstract qualities; they needed to translate

1 The Dinka Padang understood this proverb to be appropriate to the issue of establishing a household, rather than simply building a house. Oesterley agrees that “the general sense of this verse is that a young man should secure an adequate means of living before setting up as a family man” (W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Book of Proverbs* [London: Methuen, 1929], 216). In its broadest application, the proverb speaks to the fact that “laying the groundwork is necessary before embarking on any great project” (Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999], 218).

2 The Hebrew of v. 17b is problematic. The NJPS translates פָּנֵי (lit., “face”) with “wit,” but the precise nuance is debated.

3 *Dhanḥø nyii dido ki yi ngan-a lwöb gen, ni kenyi pang tɔng ki tɔng megø.*

4 In the Hebrew, the verse reads: אָמַץ קֵנָה וְאַל תִּמְכַּר חֵכְמָה וּרְמוּמָה וְיִשְׁעֵי וְדָבָר. The verb קָנָה “buy” may be understood as elided from the second line (as in the RSV translation cited above). Another syntactic interpretation takes the nouns “wisdom, instruction, and understanding” as further specifications of “truth” in the first line, a reading followed by the NJB: “Purchase truth—never sell it—wisdom, discipline, and discernment.”

the meaning of the metaphor—"work hard." But in order to keep a vivid image, they translated "wipe sweat":

Prov 23.23 (Luwo)

Wipe the sweat (i.e., work hard) to find the truth and to get wisdom and to have knowledge and the way to teach people. If you secure them, hold them tightly.¹

The translators have substituted equally vivid images—"wipe the sweat" and "hold them tightly"—in place of the biblical images of "buy" and "sell."

Using wording from traditional proverbs

Another strategy for translating biblical proverbs in such a way that they "sound" like African proverbs involves borrowing phrases from traditional African proverbs. Because African cultures use proverbs extensively, there is a rich, oral treasury of proverbial sayings from which to draw. The general principle is that to the extent that the traditional proverb expresses the meaning of the biblical proverb, there is no reason not to borrow its phrases.²

Prov 11.25 is an example of a biblical proverb whose teaching is widely echoed in African cultures:

Prov 11.25 (NRSV)

A generous person will be enriched;
and the one who gives water will get water.

The Dinka translators noted that a number of their traditional proverbs contain the same sentiment, described in a variety of ways. One of their proverbs says:

Atuel dun ca biök tueŋ aye bën la yök.
The stick that is thrown ahead is found.

This proverb draws a picture to describe the reciprocal nature of actions. When a person throws a stick ahead while walking, he/she comes upon it again shortly—what a person does will return to him/her. But closer parallels to the wording of the biblical proverb are found in variant versions of another Dinka proverb:

Ciin lo ku ciin bö.
The hand goes, and the hand comes.
Abiny lo ku abiny bö.
The bowl goes, and the bowl comes.

The proverb means: "The person who gives food (with his hand or in a bowl), will in turn receive food when he is in need." In translating Prov 11.25, the Dinka

¹ *Ced kwahg ne yoad gihn maa adiehr, kedea ne yoad ngahy luube maa ngahy nyepinye kedea ne yoad the yohn puohn nyoge. Nea giuh nu ge ayoadi e kea mag gen teeg.*

² It is interesting to note that ancient Israel incorporated traditional wisdom sayings into its compilation of the book of Proverbs. In addition, whatever the precise literary relationship between Egyptian wisdom literature (especially Amenemope's Instructions) and the book of Proverbs, the similarities in motifs and structures are undeniable. Emerton has recently reexamined the question of the literary relationship between Egyptian wisdom literature and Proverbs in "The Teaching of Amenemope and Proverbs xxii 17-xxiv 22: Further Reflections on a Long-standing Problem," *VT* 51 (2001): 431-65.

Padang translators were able to use this phraseology in the second half of the proverb:

Prov 11.25 (Dinka Padang)

The person who gives, prospers,
for the bowl goes and the bowl comes (*ně abĩny lɔ ku abĩny bõ*).

The translation accurately conveys the meaning of the biblical text and does so in a way that will instantly be recognized as sounding like a proverb. The impact on the hearers will be that of a proverb. An alternative translation without the traditional wording is possible, and was followed by another translation team in a related Dinka dialect:

Prov 11.25 (Dinka Cam)

The person who has a heart and gives to people generously is
generously given to.¹

The proverb adequately conveys the meaning of the Hebrew, but it does not communicate as powerfully as a proverb within the culture.

Adjusting for differences in culture

In many ways traditional African cultures are similar to ancient Israelite culture, but occasionally adjustments must be made because of differences in culture.

Literal translation conveys wrong meaning

It is sometimes the case that a biblical proverb, if translated literally, would convey the wrong meaning in an African context. Consider, e.g., Prov 12.23:

Prov 12.23 (NRSV)

One who is clever conceals knowledge;
but the mind of a fool broadcasts folly.

In some southern Sudanese cultures, it is considered selfish and immoral to conceal knowledge. Knowledge should be shared with the community for the benefit of everyone. In fact, the biblical proverb seems to involve hyperbole—in contrast to the fool who blathers on foolishly, a prudent person speaks carefully and deliberately. Wise people “are aware that their knowledge must fit the occasion; part of wisdom is knowing when and where not to speak. Thus a wise person inevitably ‘conceals’ knowledge.”² This idea is captured by some English translations, such as the New Living Translation:

Prov 12.23 (NLT)

Wise people don’t make a show of their knowledge,
but fools broadcast their folly.

The Shilluk translators shaped the contrast as follows:

1 *Raan nɔy puɔu ye kɔc muɔɔc, aye muɔɔc aya.*

2 Clifford, *Proverbs*, 133.

Prov 12.23 (Shilluk)

A person whose head is present (i.e., a wise person) speaks thoughtfully,
but the person whose head is small (i.e., a fool) just gurgles.¹

Here the wise person speaks thoughtfully or deliberately. In contrast, the person who is a fool is vividly described using a powerful metaphor—in the same way that a pot of porridge boils over into the fire, so a foolish person's words gurgle out of his mouth. His speech is neither deliberate nor controlled.

As another example of how a literal translation may miscommunicate, consider the first half of Prov 12.27:

Prov 12.27 (NIV)

The lazy man does not roast his game,
but the diligent man prizes his possessions.

Here the lazy man is described as being too lazy to roast the game that he has killed on the hunt.² In one African culture, this verse posed a problem because women are the ones who roast the game, not the men. Instead, a man hunts game and then brings it home for his wife to roast. Translated literally, the biblical proverb does not make sense. Of course a lazy man does not roast his game. No man roasts his game—that's women's work!

The Luwo translators solved this problem by recalling that although women roast the entire animal, it is customary for a man to roast a small, choice part of the animal in the bush immediately after he kills and skins it. Then he brings the animal to his wife in the village for roasting. The translators incorporated this cultural knowledge as follows:

Prov 12.27a (Luwo)

A lazy man will not roast even *a part of* the animal which he has killed.³

By adding the phrase “a part of,” the translation makes sense. A lazy person will not even make the effort to eat the best part of the game animal after he has made the effort of hunting and killing it.

Implicit Israelite cultural information must be made explicit

Some biblical proverbs rely upon implicit cultural information that would have been immediately understood by their hearers in ancient Israel, but which must be made explicit in translations for African cultures:

1 *Ngan wije nud nyi kööbø e orumø; de ngan wije nõg, nyi wädh-a twagø yøw.*

2 The Hebrew of this proverb is quite difficult. This interpretation follows that of most English versions and some commentators (see, e.g., Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible* [12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997], 5:128). Others understand the first line to mean that the lazy person will not be able to catch any prey to roast (see, e.g., Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* [WBC 22; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998], 87-88, 92).

3 *Ngaa tiih giñ me beeye e ngo adaahd giñn me beer.*

Prov 25.26 (NIV)

Like a muddied spring or a polluted well
is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked.

Here the righteous person who does not oppose a wicked person is compared to “a muddied spring or a polluted well.” Both “spring” and “well” are sources of fresh water. When they are muddied or polluted, they are ruined. In the same way, an otherwise righteous person is corrupted when he does not oppose wicked people.¹

The problem for the translators was that wells are not widely known in their areas. There are springs and ponds, but a muddied spring or pond is not ruined; instead, people regularly drink muddy water if that is all that is available in the dry season. However, a translation of Prov 25.26 is meaningless unless it conveys the implicit information that a muddied spring is ruined as a source of drinking water.

One translation solved this problem by substituting a similar example of a ruined water source known in their culture:

Prov 25.26 (Luwo)

A righteous person who accepts the words of an evil person
is the same as a pond where gourds are soaked.²

In this African culture, people soak gourds in ponds in order to remove the husks. The gourds make the water bitter and undrinkable. In the same way, a righteous person who does not oppose, but rather accepts, the words of an evil person is utterly corrupted.

Substitute another image for the biblical image

Biblical proverbs often hinge upon the use of images and metaphors that are drawn from observation of daily life. If the metaphor that is used in the Bible depends upon a feature of Israelite culture that is not known in Africa, some adjustment must be made in the wording of the proverb.

One option is to select a similar metaphor or simile that is known in African culture. We just saw this strategy in handling the difficulties of the “muddy pond” in Prov 25.26 above. Another example involves Prov 10.26. In cultures where vinegar is not known, the proverb loses its punch:

Prov 10.26 (NIV)

As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so is a sluggard to the one who sent him.

The biblical proverb observes that sending a lazy person to perform a task will be unpleasant or painful to the person who sent him, just like vinegar hurts the teeth and smoke hurts the eyes. In keeping the same general idea of a food that is unpleasant to eat, one translation used the simile of sorghum porridge that has small stones in it:

1 Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” 220.

2 *Abiohgrwaal me yiih lum rob ngaa me raaje ngo uroomo wa daa maa abuur keeno yea.*

Prov 10.26 (Shilluk)

Sending a lazy person is bad like chewing boiled sorghum that has small stones in it, it is like smoke in the eyes of the person who sent him.¹

Small stones may get into the sorghum flour during the harvesting process. Biting on a stone while eating the porridge is a very painful experience.

When biblical metaphors are unknown, another option is to remove the metaphor. In Prov 11.1, God is said to abhor dishonest scales, but to delight in accurate weights:

Prov 11.1 (NIV)

The LORD abhors dishonest scales,
but accurate weights are his delight.

The biblical proverb reflects ancient Israelite culture where vendors in the marketplace used scales and weights to measure produce. One way to cheat was to have scales or weights that were not accurate. Clearly, it is not inanimate scales and weights that God loves or hates, but rather God loves individuals who practice honest commerce and he hates individuals who practice dishonest commerce.

In cultures where scales are not known, it may be necessary to remove the imagery of scales and weights and focus on the broader meaning of honesty in commerce. One African translation rendered the proverb in this way:

Prov 11.1 (Dinka Cam)

The Lord abominates confusion of eye (i.e., deception) through selling,
and he loves whiteness of heart (i.e., honesty) through selling.²

In this case, the proverb remains vivid through the introduction of two other metaphors—"confusion of eye" to refer to deception, and "whiteness of heart" to refer to honesty—but the metaphor of scales and weights has been replaced by the meaning of the metaphor, "selling."

Conclusions

Translating biblical proverbs into African languages is both challenging and exciting. Because language at its very nature is an indivisible composite of form and meaning, it is impossible to translate meaning without also using linguistic forms. There is, after all, no meaning and no translation without words and words have forms. We cannot escape the question of how to balance competing concerns about accurate meaning and appropriate form.

Different ideals concerning the role of form and meaning within translation produce different kinds of translations, which in turn fulfill differing needs. To return to our attempts to translate a Dinka proverb into English, we can see that each of our attempts at translation could be valid for achieving a particular goal. Our literally translated Dinka proverb would be useful for someone interested in

1 *Ōri ranɣõ :ki yĩ ngan-a őrii, ni nyami byell ri gen da lel; o na yĩrõ :ki nyinge.*

2 *Yakoba aman ruēj ē nyin ē nyin nē ʀeec ē kāy yīic ku anhiar ʀeer ēpuḍi nē ʀeecē kāy yīic.*

the metaphors and idioms of Dinka proverbs, or in their sociocultural setting.¹ Literally translated proverbs are also useful for comparing the idioms of one African language with those in another African language. A translation of biblical proverbs that mimics the form of the original Hebrew could be useful for teaching students who do not read Hebrew how to recover the network of meanings within the biblical text.² It would also be useful for gaining understanding about the sociocultural background of ancient Israel. At the same time, there are inherent disadvantages of this approach in Africa (and elsewhere). As we have seen, a literal translation may result in a translation that does not sound like a proverb and cannot be used as a proverb. In other cases, because a literal translation recreates the sociocultural setting of ancient Israel without regard for African culture, a literal translation may result in a translation that conveys the wrong meaning in African cultures, or translation in which implicit information that is critical for understanding the proverb is missing. For these reasons, a literal translation would need to be accompanied with a commentary explaining the meaning and function of each proverb.

A second kind of translation technique would produce our explanatory version of the Dinka proverb. This translation is useful to explain what the proverb means within Dinka culture and it is highly accessible to many kinds of readers. However, explanations of proverbs lack the characteristic features of proverbial form. No one would remember and quote the explanatory version of the proverb in order to make a point.

A third kind of translation technique would produce our final versions of the proverb that “sound like” proverbs in English and could be used as proverbs to influence behavior. In this third way of translation, the translator must balance competing concerns of form and meaning in order to accurately convey the meaning using a proverbial form. As we saw, African translators use a variety of techniques to achieve this goal. They will attempt to make the proverb as succinct and pithy as possible. They may use vivid imagery to translate metaphorical expressions. They may use phraseology borrowed from traditional proverbs. They will be alert to instances where they must make adjustments for ways in which their cultures differ from that of ancient Israel.

The process of searching for just the right phrase to convey the correct meaning of a biblical proverb in a powerful but succinct way is often skull-crackingly hard. The other methods of translation—a literal translation or an explanatory translation—are not as difficult, because they privilege either form or meaning. When the translation privileges the *form* by translating in a way that only the semantic content of the original is conveyed, the translator is able to ignore those aspects of meaning which are implicit or cultural, as well as the pragmatic function of the proverb. When the translation privileges *meaning* by translating in a way that all of the implicit cultural implications and pragmatic functions are

1 Sumner-Paulin argues that because proverbs reflect the cultural system and social organization of a community, they should be “transcoded” (i.e., translated literally) in order to recreate the atmosphere and cognitive world of the original proverb. See Catherine Sumner-Paulin, “Traduction et culture: quelques proverbes africains traduits,” *Meta* 40 (1995): 548-55, esp. 554.

2 This argument is laid out by Fox, who calls this kind of translation “mimetic.” See Michael V. Fox, “Translation and Mimesis,” in *Translation in Context* (ed. F. W. Knobloch, Studies in Jewish History and Culture, 10; Bethesda: University of Maryland Press, 2001), 207-20.

made explicit, the translator is able to ignore the fact that the form of the translated proverb bears no resemblance to a proverb within African society.¹

If the goal in translating the book of Proverbs into African languages is academic or purely informational, then translators need not consider whether the shapes that biblical proverbs take within African languages sound like proverbs within that culture. But if the goal of translating Proverbs is that the biblical proverbs should be meaningful, powerful, compelling observations about life, which will transform those who hear them, then the translated proverbs must have a proverbial shape. In African cultures, which are permeated with proverbial sayings, a translation of Proverbs will be successful to the extent that the biblical proverbs are assimilated into the language and become part of the cultural fabric of the society.

RICHARD S. HESS

ADAM, FATHER, HE: Gender Issues in Hebrew Translation

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This essay will consider three areas that have created some dispute in the issue of gender-inclusive translations of the Hebrew text. They are: the question of the rendering of *'ādām* in the first three or four chapters of Genesis, the question of the role of the term for “father” or “parent,” particularly as it is used in the book of Proverbs, and the issue of the so-called generic “he” as the most accurate rendering of the commonly recognized 3rd masculine singular independent personal pronoun in Hebrew, *hū'*. These provide pivotal issues for the question of the most appropriate and accurate translation of the Hebrew text of the Bible into English. They have also become a kind of litmus test as to whether the Old Testament is translated according to the philosophy of those who attempt a gender-specific or a gender-inclusive rendering.

At this point I wish to insert some caveats. Although I would confess that I have a preference for gender-inclusive translations, I have participated in the translation and editing of a variety of Bible translations. I have no qualms about this because I do not agree with those who search for the single ideal English translation that will accurately render the Hebrew Bible in its entirety. I believe the best option remains multiple translations, both for a variety of English-speaking subcultures and in order to demonstrate the fundamental principle that there is no single absolutely accurate translation of the Bible. For the student who wishes to understand the Bible as completely as possible, no translation can ever replace a careful and intensive study of the original languages. Failing that, the next best alternative is to draw upon the wisdom of a variety of scholars as represented by

¹ Only rarely has this feat been accomplished in English translations. For a consideration of the translation of Prov 13.24 as a proverb, which has entered English culture (“spare the rod and spoil the child”), see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (N. Y.: Basic, 1985), 166-7.