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USER-FRIENDLY TRANSLATION

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The Bible Society movement first began in a time when Christian denominations were much more wary of one another in matters of doctrine than they are now. It was partly in order to defuse the problems that this was capable of causing that the Bible Societies committed themselves to producing the Scriptures "without note or comment". Everyone wanted the Scriptures, but notes and comments were likely to be slanted toward one or another denomination. It was therefore better to avoid them altogether.

During the last generation the Bible Society movement has become more acutely aware that the people who read the Bible need and want various extra things in their Bibles to make them more easily used and understood. In order to meet this need, the Bible Societies have had to re-think the issue of "note and comment". This has been done very effectively, to the point that nowadays we are almost suspicious of a plain Bible without any added features.

Some of the things in our Bibles which make our publications more user-friendly than they usually were fifty years ago are: section headings, parallel passage references, illustrations, maps, book introductions, cross references, and textual notes. Many Bibles also include other types of notes as well, giving various kinds of cultural, geographical, and literary background which can help the readers' understanding of the text. And many also include other helps at the back, such as small concordances or word lists.

It seems to me that there are still a number of other things that the Bible Societies can encourage translators and publishers to do to help people who will be using the Bibles we produce; and in this article I would like to give some examples of these. Many of these points are not matters of principle, and there may sometimes be good reasons not to follow them. But I think that many of them would provide help to our readers in a practical way.

Break lines at meaningful places

In the running text of the Bible, people expect to read until they get to the end of a line and then continue on to the next line. In this

context, fluent readers usually do not notice how a particular line ends and how the next line begins. However, there are certain places in our Bibles where I think that some thought should be given to line division. This is especially true in poetic lines and in section headings.

Poetic lines

Each literary language has its own traditions of how poetry should be written. If the comments here do not fit the traditions of a particular language, then probably they should be ignored as far as that language is concerned. However, in English and in many other languages, the line is one of the most important features of a poem. Poets choose their words carefully, and place them carefully on the right line. It is the poet who decides where line breaks are to come.

In our Bibles, there tend to be long passages which are "set out as poetry", to use our technical way of describing it. How seriously the translators try to make these passages actually sound poetic differs greatly from one language to another. But in any case, they are printed on the page in such a way that they will supposedly look like poetry to our readers. But in spite of this effort to make these passages look and sound poetic, we have a strange tendency to leave the key matter of line breaks to typesetters and computers. Great attention is often given to where the main line breaks should be put. But in the process of typesetting, it may turn out that many of the poetic lines are too long to fit into the space available. In that case, the typesetting program will produce a run-on line in order to print the text that would not fit on the main line.

As an example, I refer to pages 880-81 in an edition I have of the revised GNB. It seems that the translators themselves intended Jeremiah 50.2 to be set out like this:

> "Tell the news to the nations! Proclaim it!
> Give the signal and announce the news!
> Do not keep it a secret!
> Babylon has fallen!
> Her God Marduk has been shattered!
> Babylon's idols are put to shame;
> her disgusting images are crushed!

The text of this verse has been translated as having seven lines of poetry using two levels of indent But by the time the typesetters have finished with the text, there are twelve lines (we can hardly call them "lines of poetry" at this point), and five of these lines are found at the third level of indenting. Furthermore, some of the lines end in extraordinary places:

> Her god Marduk has been
> shattered!
> Babylon's idols are put to
> shame;

Now it is true that modern English poets are sometimes capable of producing line breaks like this. As long as it is done intentionally, there is no reason for complaint. What I am questioning is the way that so

many of our Bibles have line breaks in the poetic passages which are produced by a strange process that happens between translators-as-poets and typesetting computers.

It is also true, of course, that there are practical problems here. Most of our Bibles are produced in two-column format, and poetic lines tend to be too long to fit. Nevertheless, there are various ways that these problems can be dealt with. At the very least, I would suggest that if poetic lines need to be broken, it should not be a computer that decides where the breaks should come.

I should mention also that one of the selling points about the recent CEV translation is that special care has been taken with poetic lines. Presumably no edition of the CEV should have the type of run-on lines that are so common in the revised GNB (and in the NRSV and elsewhere).

Section headings

Section headings are of course not intended to be poetic. So there is not the same sort of theoretical reason for breaking them at meaningful places. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is more user-friendly to give our readers lines that are as meaningful as possible. To see the value of this, we only need to compare headings from some versions which do it (such as NRSV and some printings of the CEV):

The Parable of the Pharisee
and the Tax Collector

Paul Says Goodby
to the Church Leaders of Ephesus

with headings from some which do not (such as GNB and other CEV printings):

The Question about Rising from
Death

Faith in the
Law of
the Lord

Some people believe that good English writing style should not end sentences with prepositions. I agree with Winston Churchill that this is a ridiculous rule which would often force us to use very unnatural English if we try to follow it rigidly. However, I do think that it is an excellent rule for sections headings: a line in a section heading should not end with a preposition, or with such words as "the" or "and". There are also other things these lines should not end with, but the real point is that the lines need to be broken at meaningful places. This can only be done by a human being, not by a computer.

Of course there are times when thoughtless line breaks can actually give the wrong meaning. Look at the heading for Matthew 23.1 in some editions of the revised GNB:

Jesus Warns against the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees

People reading this could easily assume that Jesus was warning against the people who teach the Law and who also teach the Pharisees.

Make references clear at the beginning of new sections

I think that it is wise for translators to remember a crucial point about the significance of section headings for readers. When we divide the Bible text into sections and add section headings, we inevitably provide readers with ready-made blocks of text. Whether for private devotions or for public reading, the unit of text actually used on any given occasion is likely to be a single section (often including the section heading itself). And given that many people will be reading or hearing a particular section as a unit in itself, translators should seriously consider making all of the references clear at the beginning of each section.

In the NIV, Luke 8.26-39 is treated as a section which begins "They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes." Nowhere in this section is the reader told who "They" may be. In verse 27, we are told that one of "they" is Jesus, but even when Jesus sails away at the end of the section, there is no hint that there is anyone else in the boat with him. It would have been better to start verse 26 with "Jesus and his disciples", as is done by both GNB and CEV.

NIV is even more confusing at Luke 9.37, where a section again begins with "they". In this case, a man begins to address Jesus, but Jesus himself is not mentioned by name until verse 41. In this section, too, it is never made clear who the others may be who are included in the pronoun "they" of verse 37.

In an NIV section called "The Parable of the Ten Minas", Luke 19.11-27, the text begins "While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem." The rest of the section contains the parable, with no further reference to either "he" or "they". Of course, people will probably assume that the one telling the parable must be Jesus. But there is no real reason to leave the matter unclear. Both GNB and CEV make it clear that "they" are "the crowd" or "the people", and "he" is Jesus.

However, all three of the versions are a bit confusing at the beginning of the section which starts at Luke 9.10. What will readers understand if someone begins a Bible reading with "The apostles came back and told Jesus everything that they had done"? (CEV) Would it not be better to say, "came back from their preaching and healing mission" (see 9.2, 6)? This small addition from the wider context makes the section more readily understandable as a unit.

There is one special case where the wording of a section heading can interact with an unclear reference to cause considerable confusion. This happens whenever the heading refers to something different from what is intended by the reference in the text. For example, the section heading at Mark 1.29 in the NIV is "Jesus Heals Many"; but the text begins, "As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to

the home of Simon and Andrew." Who are they? Some readers may assume that "they" are the "many" that the heading tells us Jesus healed.

What these examples emphasize is that it is helpful to make clear any references to people, time, and place at the beginning of each section. Similarly, if someone is speaking, it is often a good idea to remind the reader of who is speaking. Sometimes it will be good to include who is being spoken to, as well. In our current translations, many sections begin with only a quotation mark to indicate that the following text is giving someone's actual words. The reference to who is speaking is given in an earlier section, and the quotation marks indicate that the same person is continuing to speak. In the NIV, this is true of the sections which begin at Luke 11.33, 12.35, 12.49, 15.8, 16.16, and 16.19, for example. GNB and CEV do not always begin sections at exactly the same verses as NIV. But in the cases where they are the same, only CEV at 15.8 has dealt with this problem. There CEV expands the quotation mark to "Jesus told the people another story: ..."

It is true that some of the sections mentioned here are quite short ones, and it is perhaps less likely that people will be reading them on their own, without including more of the context. It is probably not necessary to refer to the person speaking at the beginning of every single section. But it is nevertheless a point that translators should keep in mind as they are doing their work.

A book like Deuteronomy is a special problem. Much of the book is presented as a speech given by Moses. In the revised GNB, Deuteronomy 1.9 begins "Moses said to the people, "While we were ...". The next seven sections, which take us to the end of chapter 3, all begin with quotation marks. Every one of these sections begins with a sentence using pronouns like "I", "we", "your", and "our". People who start reading at the beginning of chapter 3 (for example) have to work their way back through five sections before they find out who is speaking and who "we" are.

A similar stretch of text begins at Deuteronomy 5.1, where Moses is mentioned. The next 27 sections begin with quotation marks, carrying us all the way to 18.14, where we are told again that the speaker is Moses. The sections beginning at 10.1 and 11.8 refer to "I" or "me", and many of the sections have "you" in their first sentence. It will take a quite sophisticated reader to work out who these pronouns refer to. This problem continues through chapter 26 of Deuteronomy and from time to time in the later chapters, as well.

Again, it is important for translators to at least be aware of this issue and to consider whether there may be various ways in which they could provide help for their readers.

Include all verse numbers

Give combined verse numbers even when a whole verse is omitted

The verse numbering which we use today was developed long before the era of modern textual criticism. As a result, there are now a number of places where text critics doubt the authenticity of stretches of text which include a whole verse or more. In translations, these bits

of text will therefore usually be omitted completely or included only as footnotes. For example, in the book of Luke in the revised GNB, Luke 17.36 and 23.17 are found only in footnotes.

In cases like this, what happens to the sequence of verse numbers in the text? In the GNB of Luke 17, a reader will find verse 35 followed by verse 37. In chapter 23, verse 16 is followed by verse 18. Even though the problem is explained in a footnote, some readers will be mystified and assume that there is a printing error at that point. Almost every translation done these days follows the practice of combining verse numbers to show that the text of two verses has been mixed in the translation process. For example, in the GNB text of Luke 23, verses 44 and 45 are combined as "44-45," and similarly for verses 50 and 51. It is therefore possible to avoid confusing our readers by doing something similar at points where text needs to be omitted. Instead of jumping from verse 16 to verse 18, one can number verse 16 as 16-17. The footnote can just say, "Some manuscripts add, '...' ", giving the text but not mentioning that in fact this omitted text happens to coincide with the traditional verse 17.

Include verse number 1

I do not know what its history may be, but there is a peculiar Bible publishing custom which seems to be quite firmly entrenched, at least in much of the English-speaking world. This custom dictates that we provide verse numbers for every verse in a chapter except verse 1, which is left unnumbered. I have no idea what English readers may think of this custom, if they ever notice it. But I can see no reason for extending this English printing custom to Bibles printed in other languages. Let me give an enthusiastic recommendation that the first verse in each chapter should also have its number!

In any case, there are times even in English when it is necessary to provide a number for verse 1. I have an edition of the CEV which ordinarily does not provide verse 1. However, in cases where verse 1 is combined with another verse in translation, then the verse number is given. 1 Kings chapters 1, 2, and 3 have no number "1" at the beginning of the first verse of the chapter. Chapter 4, however, begins with "1-6", because the first six verses here have somehow been combined. Chapters 5 through 7 again have no beginning verse number, but chapter 8 begins with "1-2". And so on. Even for English readers, this seems unnecessarily confusing.

Another case where it is necessary to give a number to verse number 1 is when the verse comes in the middle of a paragraph. In a case like this, there is no way to know where the verse begins unless it is given a number or marked in some other way. In the edition of the CEV just mentioned, there is a case of this at 1 Corinthians 11.1. This verse is treated as the end of a paragraph beginning with 10.31, and the number 1 appears where 11.1 begins. But none of the other chapters in 1 Corinthians have the first verse numbered.

In this same edition of the CEV, a decision has apparently been

made to include verse number 1 at the beginning of each Psalm. We might think that this has been done because the text is set out as poetry. However, Proverbs is also set out as poetry, but in the chapters of Proverbs there is no number at the beginning of verse 1.

I was delighted to see editions of the revised GNB and of the CEV, both published by the Bible Society of Australia, which include the number 1 at the beginning of every chapter. I do not have an American edition of the revised GNB to refer to, but sadly, my Thomas Nelson edition of the CEV is the one with the rather inconsistent numbering practice referred to in the previous paragraphs. Perhaps the Bible Society of Australia is the vanguard of a new day in numbering English Bibles!

Paragraphs at the beginning of chapters

There is another Bible-publishing custom which may somehow be related to the custom of omitting the number for verse 1. This custom involves a failure to mark paragraphs at the beginning of a chapter. The chapter number is commonly printed in large type which is two lines tall, and the custom is to print the text of the two lines next to the chapter number without any paragraph indent.

It happens to be the case that more often than not the beginning of a chapter is the beginning of a new section, and therefore automatically the beginning of a new paragraph. If this were always the case, then perhaps it would not matter a great deal whether this paragraph was clearly marked or not. However, we have already seen a case in the CEV where 1 Corinthians 11.1 comes in the middle of a paragraph. There are other chapters, too, where translators need to decide whether verse 1 is a new paragraph or the continuation of the previous paragraph. This means that it is better to give ourselves the option of indicating whether or not there is a new paragraph at the beginning of a chapter. My own recommendation is that we should drop the publishing custom already referred to, and use the regular paragraph indent at the beginning of all chapters which begin with paragraphs.

Make key verses memorable, able to stand alone

During the last national election in Papua New Guinea (1997) a number of Christians became involved in a major campaign to encourage people to pray for the elections and the various candidates. The theme verse of this campaign was 2 Chronicles 7.14, "If my people, who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (NRSV)

This campaign was conducted both in English and in Tok Pisin, and I noticed that the Tok Pisin wording of the verse was quite different from what is found in the Tok Pisin Bible. Obviously someone had decided that the wording in the Tok Pisin Bible did not focus sufficiently on the points that the campaign wanted to focus on. (Notice that if one desired emphasis is on the idea of "healing the land", then neither GNB

"make their land prosperous again" or CEV "make their land fertile once again" will satisfy the people, either.) One probable reason was that in the process of translating the passage into clear Tok Pisin, verses 13 and 14 have been combined.

Of course it is not possible for translators to anticipate every verse that someone may want to use for a theme or a campaign, and this probably should not be a major influence on a translation. However, this incident did cause me to reflect that this is in fact one of the ways in which the church uses the Bible, and translators probably should at least keep it in mind as they work. In cases where a certain verse is known to be regularly used on its own, special attention should probably be given to making it especially clear and effective.

Illustrations can help to identify well-known passages

Many Bible Societies are producing Bibles for people who are already familiar with the Bible. Frequently people who use the Bible regularly will be looking for favorite or well-known passages. Some Bible Societies have included in their Bibles a section on "Where to look in the Bible for ...". This can be very helpful.

Another practical suggestion was made to me a number of years ago. The suggestion was that we should be careful to be sure that there is an illustrations at each passage which people will want to refer to frequently. People may not remember exactly where the passage is, and they may not know exactly what they should check for in a "Where to look" list. But if they have already found the passage in the Bible before, and there is a memorable illustration next to the passage, then whenever they want to read the passage again, all they have to do is to quickly leaf through the Bible until they find the illustration which identifies the passage they want.

Make "readers' helps" part of the translation process

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned a number of readers' helps which are often included in today's Bibles. However, I have noticed a tendency to treat these helps as something which needs to be put together after the translation task is largely finished and we are ready to think about publication. Sometimes it is not even the translation team which produces the reader's helps.

Translators need to be convinced that readers' helps are an important and necessary part of the job of translation. When a translator is trying to describe an animal or artifact which is completely unknown in the area where the translation will be used, it will often be the case that the best way to get the new concept across will be by the use of an illustration or diagram. In other cases, a footnote will be necessary. Translators need to put requests for illustrations and footnotes at relevant points right in their draft manuscripts as they are working on them.

At other times, a map may be just what is needed to make a passage clear. In such a case, the translator should include a note requesting a map.

It seems to me that as much as possible our use of these readers' helps should be driven by the translation process. In practice, the translation process may not produce the number of illustrations, maps, cross-references, and so on, that we need for a complete production. It will probably still be necessary to fill out the lists after the translation work is done. There is no problem with that. The point is that all of these reader's helps can be used as ways to convey the full meaning to the reader. Translators need to be constantly aware of the various resources at their disposal to get the meaning across.

There is one practical aspect of this which the Bible Societies may not be fully ready to deal with. We tend to have our range of illustrations and maps which are available for use in Bible Society publications. If a translator asks for an illustration or diagram or map which is not included in the existing set of options, how would we deal with such a request? Do we have people ready to produce the requested item on demand? I think that this is a service that the United Bible Societies should be able to find a way to provide.

Conclusion

No doubt there are many other practical points which would also help to make a translation more "user friendly". Some people may have their own suggestions and observations which could be added to the ones discussed here. Of course, others may prefer to have their own lists, and they may not want to include every suggestion made here. But I think the principle is nevertheless an important one. We are doing our translations for the sake of the people who will be reading them. These practical matters can make a difference to our readers' ability to use the translations effectively. It is well worth giving some extra attention to anything that can help people to use, appreciate, and understand the translations we are doing.

Some people may feel that some of the points discussed in this paper are not really the business of translators. They may argue that they are the responsibility of the Bible Societies which will be producing the Bibles. This is at least partly true. Even in the examples discussed in this article, we have seen the quite different ways that the CEV has been produced in America and Australia. However, in actual practice, in many language projects it is the translators who end up making the decisions about the format of the publication. Furthermore, if translators feel strongly about some of the points discussed, then even if they are not the ones with the final say, they can at least pass them on to the Bible Societies' production staff as recommendations.

Some of these issues are definitely issues that translators need to consider. But even in cases where others may be making the final decisions, I think that it is useful for translators to become sensitive to the main issue here, namely the importance of producing a user-friendly translation.