

“UNDERSTANDEST THOU WHAT THOU READEST?”

Dr. Tony Naden is a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics at present attached to the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Tamale, Ghana.

Dr. Barclay Newman, writing in *TBT* 31 (3) of July 1980 (pages 325-336), passes some strictures on the New International Version (NIV) which confirm the informal evaluation which I had myself formed of this version. I would, however, add a *caveat* on an assumption which underlies Dr. Newman's discussion—and indeed much of the rest of our modern approach to translation—as to the precise nature of the “meaningfulness” or “clarity” which is our avowed aim.

In general today we are reacting against translations of a previous generation which carry wrong or zero meaning by so bending the surface form of the translation to match formal features (including lexical form) of the source language (SL) that the result is not a text in the target or receptor language (TL), or is a text with a significantly different sense. Or we object to versions which only communicate to a minority, particularly a highly-educated, high-social-class, or churchy minority—the NEB has been said to be “not in the language of our times but in the languages of *The Times*” (the London newspaper formerly advertised as being for “Top People”). It seems to me that we are now in danger of overreacting, and trying to produce translations which are immediately meaningful to any reader, irrespective of his degree of literacy, intelligence or interest. The focus is solely on cognitive, literal meaning. This may be a laudable aim for a tract, but does it always make for good Bible translation? There are two particular facets of this overreaction which bother me.

1 Unequal effect. Although Nida in some sense adopted the slogan of “dynamic equivalence” as a watered-down (while clearer and more attainable) version of the aim of “equal effect”, there remain a number of senses in which the latter phrase is a fair gloss of the aims of a translator. This raises the question of whether the original Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures were “clear” and “meaningful” to contemporaries in the sense in which we sometimes interpret those terms. Did the average speaker of *koiné* Greek find no difficulty in 2 Peter 2.4-9 or Romans 2.14-21? And if he did, is a non-difficult version of those passages a good translation? Did all the congregation of the Galatian church grasp the whole of Paul's letter to them when it was first read (let alone the street-corner literate, had he been able to pick it up on his neighbourhood news stand)? If “‘front-heavy’ sentences” and “distance between subject and predicate” are constructions which “strain the memory capacity of the reader” (Newman, *op. cit.*, 326-7) because of the sequential linearity of speech/script, then they must have been an equal strain to the Greek audience, except in as far as the greater frequency of such constructions in Greek may have given people more practice, or patience, in waiting. In other words, if we recognize it as desirable, as Newman implicitly does, that the style of the translation should “reflect the different styles of biblical writers” (p. 331),

then to iron out everything in the Bible to a uniform easy cognitive intelligibility is surely to be guilty of a failure of translation principle. It may even be necessary to render “heaviness” or “difficulty” in the original by a different sort of heaviness or difficulty more appropriate to the TL stylistic resources.

My paperback Living Bible has a blurb quoting Cliff Richard as saying “It makes the Bible read like today’s newspaper.” The question is whether authors like Paul or Mark wrote as the socio-literary equivalent in their day of our “today’s newspaper”. For one thing, however “imminent” their eschatology, their approach probably lacked the ephemerality essential to modern journalism—“yesterday’s papers, with yesterday’s news”.

2 Formal meaning. A closely-related problem arises when a significant part of the meaning of the original resides in the form. This is normally raised when the translation of poetry is under consideration. Given the special difficulties of this latter subject, I would rather focus on the question of the prophetic orale. Although this was admittedly poetical, my emphasis is elsewhere. If Isaiah utters a pair of couplets totalling twelve words:

Know ox his-owner,
 Donkey crib-of his-master;
 Israel not knows,
 My-people not understand.

(Isaiah 1.3—gloss of Hebrew text)

as essential part of the message is its brevity, force, ‘punch’. It is to be compared with modern advertising slogans or newspaper headlines, which are not always immediately interpretable. To restrict ourselves to cognitive meaning is far too narrow. J. R. Firth, discussing many “Modes of Meaning” (in his *Essays and Studies*, 1951, 118 ff.) including the phonological, wrote: “It is surely part of the meaning of an American to sound like one”. Similarly, it is part of the meaning of a prophet to sound like one, rather than like a schoolmarm. The first result of our pursuit of clarity is too often wordiness. I found, for instance, that a 9-word verse in Isaiah was 27 words in GNB, and when that was taken as a base by a Mampruli translator he produced 35 words in Mampruli. Admittedly the significance of any given number of words differs from one language to another—what would be normal for English would be laconic for French and windy for Hebrew—but it is still a matter to be watched. The prophet is “translated” from a powerful sloganeer to a heavy, long-winded preachifier.

A similar point is raised by quotations from the Old Testament in the New. It is certainly true that “biblicisms, archaisms, translationese” (Newman, 329) are a trap to be avoided in translating passages that would have been heard by the original audience as straight narrative or exposition, and are a blemish in such passages in versions like NIV. There is a considerable question mark, however, when one considers some patterns of echoes and allusions to Septuagintal language in some passages whether some scriptural language would not have sounded “biblicistic” or “archaic” to someone outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. Where the NT writers use straight quotation from their 200-year-old Greek version of the OT, there are strong arguments for J.

B. Phillips' solution that a modern English version should render these with quotes from the KJV, the "archaic ring" and "connotation of sanctity and authority" (Newman, 325). This would presumably reflect more accurately the overall meaning of the discourse act "quoting the Bible" than a passage—albeit indented and referenced—which matched exactly the style of the words of Paul in which it was imbedded. If the LXX was not *that* incomprehensible, perhaps one could use the RSV (or even the NIV!).

NIV—no! Clarity and meaningfulness—yes! But is it good translation to be more clear and meaningful than the original?

REVIEWS

Peter Newmark: **Approaches to translation**. London: Pergamon Press 1981. 200 pp., £5.95. Foreword by Eugene A. Nida.

"Personally I regard translation as a complex, artificial and *unnatural* process, requiring an exceptional degree of intelligence" (97). A somewhat startling statement from an authority on translation, but an encouragement to the reviewers to be able to assume such an intellectually elite readership!

Professor Newmark brings to this book long experience in the teaching of translators and wide acquaintance with translation theory. His background is narrow language-wise (apparently confined to certain European languages) but textually broad (ranging from Shakespeare to advertisements). The title of his book is significant: it presents a variety of approaches to different aspects of translation, not one cohesive approach (see below). It is in fact based on a selection of previously published papers, and this combined with his deliberate diversity of approach makes the book somewhat difficult reading. The reader is helped, however, by an abundance of illustrations.

Of major interest to Bible translators will be Professor Newmark's avowed aim to "contest the present dominance" of communicative/dynamic-equivalence approaches to translation. Such translations aim to produce "as nearly as possible the same effect on the readers as was produced on the readers of the original", and Professor Newmark points out that this in practice is impossible to verify, most particularly when the original readership was an ancient one now inaccessible to us. In addition, it is impossible to reproduce the original effect in the case of closely language-bound matters such as puns and jokes, or in communications which are closely culture-bound in the original. It is, however, possible to agree with all these criticisms without necessarily agreeing with Professor Newmark's alternative approach. Indeed, the most discouraging aspect of the book is that he seems to consider no one alternative approach to be possible. Any Bible translator is aware of the tensions and conflicts that inevitably arise when source and target languages, or source and target cultures, differ greatly. Professor Newmark is so intensely aware of such conflicts that he repeatedly rejects the notion of any general theory of translation whatsoever. "I dismiss any prospect of a general theory of translation, on