

Digression, Explanation and Text Logic

In an interesting note (*TBT*, April 1984), David Cranmer alerts us to the situation where apparently-logical connectives like “for”, “because” (Greek *gar*) cannot necessarily be translated by the normal equivalent of such terms. He refers to an article by Ernst Wendland discussing these as “digressions”.

There is a little more to say, however, on whether the term “digression” is really appropriate, and on the way in which logical links of this sort may operate in natural language.

A digression is strictly something which is not really connected with the “business in hand”:

“As I was going down the High Street I met Mrs Smith (*by the way, have you seen they’ve painted the lampposts in the High Street a sickly green?*) and she said . . .

This more commonly happens in informal, unplanned conversation; it does not come up very much in Scripture. Perhaps the most famous case is in Ephesians chapter 3 where the “For this reason I, Paul . . .” of verse 1 is continued in verse 14 “For this reason I bow my knees . . .” (RSV), verses 2 to 13 being a digression on Paul’s apostleship to the Gentiles.

Most of the cases discussed by Wendland and Cranmer are probably better described by the other term “explanation”. Some of these may be digressions in that they are not essential to the story line; these cannot be translated by “for” or “because”, though they may have *gar* in the Greek: they are often appropriately set off by dashes or parentheses (even made into footnotes?):

“. . . release unto us Barabbas—a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder.” Luke 23.18–19 (RSV)

Knowing who Barabbas was can heighten the impact of the story, but the only fact we actually need to know is that the crowd asked for somebody else, not Jesus.

In these editorial explanations we see the beginning of the process that we have to wrestle with in our modern translations: of including information which was not stated in the text, but which was known to the original readers. Telling the Gospel in Palestine a few years after the crucifixion the speaker only had to mention that they asked for Barabbas—everyone would have known about him; as the message spread further afield and time passed, then the “meaning” of the name had to be made clear by an explanatory note.

A similar case, but one where the explanation is more necessary for understanding, is the beginning of Mark chapter 7:

“the Pharisees . . . saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. . . and asked him “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition . . . ? Mark 7.1, 2, 5 (RSV)

Jewish readers would get the point, but for Gentiles Mark has to add the explanation:

(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat until they wash their hands . . .) Mark 7.3–4 (RSV)

In contrast with these *editorial* explanations, the cases David Cranmer discusses are explanations offered by the people in the story themselves, in their quoted speech:

“They do all their deeds to be seen by men;
for they make their phylacteries broad . . .”

Matt 23.5 (RSV)

The main sense in which these explanations are “digressions” is the way in which they are inserted out of the straight-forward order of the narrative or argument. In a very carefully worked-out text like a novel or a folktale, Barabbas (for instance) would be introduced ahead of time with an explanation of who he was, then mentioned by name when the people call for him. Mark’s order, with the “digressive” explanation, is more characteristic of real-life narrative. This “flashback”, out-of-order feature may be one reason for using “because”: in reality a cause comes before its effect, and so the natural order of report is: A therefore B. The order, B because A, is itself an out-of-order or flashback way of presenting things (this may be a major function of *gar* in Greek). In many languages, in fact, it is only possible to use the logical-order, A therefore B, presentation—there is no “because”. In the Gur language of northern Ghana the words used for “because” are loans from Hausa or English; the older and more natural form of expression uses “therefore”. The translator can use the established loans, but probably should not use “because” as frequently as the English or Greek does, but restructure some cases to “A therefore B” order.

It remains to ask *why* these explanations should be expressed by an apparently illogical use of logical link-words. To see this we need to think more carefully about how language is actually used. In any normal use there is a speaker (or writer) trying to communicate to a hearer (or reader). We cannot really work out the full meaning of the interaction just by looking at the words uttered without taking the speaker/hearer relationship into account. Again, when we are not thinking carefully we tend to treat language as if it is basically used for conveying information, facts; if we consider more realistically all the uses we make of speech, we see that it is used to ask questions, make promises, issue commands, persuade, apologise, request, and many other such purposes. The study of these questions of language-in-use is called *pragmatics*: it was neglected by earlier students of language but is being increasingly studied by academic linguists in these days.

One of the problems is that much of pragmatics concerns things we “know” or “assume”, or “presuppose”, without being able to point to a particular word, particle or phrase and say that it carries a pragmatic meaning.

Consider a simple utterance, such as Fati saying to Ali:

“Is it market today?”

In normal conversational situations we “know” that:

- (a) Fati is speaker
- (b) Ali is addressee
- (c) Fati is lacking some information

- (d) Fati has reason to believe that Ali may have that information
- (e) Fati wants to have that information
- (f) Fati requests Ali to give her that information

If it seems a bit elaborate to draw all these elements out of one brief utterance (and its situation), we should consider that a number of different responses would be regarded as sensible and acceptable:

- (g) “Yes.” or “No.” (supplying information as requested—f)
- (h) “I don’t know.” (can’t do f because supposition d is incorrect)
- (i) “Why (do you ask)?” (queries reason for e)
- (j) “Don’t you know?” (queries validity of c)
- (k) “Who’s asking? or “Are you asking me?” (checking a/b)

Answer (k) would be made when there was some genuine difficulty in knowing—the conversation takes place in a crowd, in the dark, or over the telephone. Answer (i) would be a little rude by itself, but is very common as an addition to a (g) answer:

- (i) “Yes, why do you ask?” or “No, it’s tomorrow—why?”

This last consideration is the key to many of the “illogical” uses of “because”: the reason given is not that for something within the utterance but is *the reason for making the utterance*:

- “Is it market day today, because I need some onions?”

In this very normal, sensible utterance my need of onions is not offered as the cause of today’s being market day but as the cause of my asking (as I can remedy the lack by buying onions if it is, in fact, market today).

Other logical connectives may be applied to the pragmatic assumptions in the same sort of way:

- “If you’re going to market, I need some onions.”

My need of onions doesn’t come into existence only in the case that you are going to market, but it is only relevant *for me to inform you* of my lack in the case that you are going (and so can do something to remedy it).

There may not even be an actual conjunction involved; in the very passage in Mark 7 mentioned earlier we have Jesus saying:

- “Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on . . .”

Mark 7.18–19 (RSV)

and immediately after this, literally:

- . . . making all things clean.

Here the “logic” is not in a link-word but in the participle “making-clean”, the meaning being that this cleansing happens at the same time as, and goes along with, something else. The reasonable interpretation is not that the passage through the bowels purifies food, as implied by the KJV and by older Greek texts which put the phrase into Jesus’ saying, with the closing question-mark coming after it:

- “Do you not perceive . . . purging all meats?”

Rather, this phrase should be taken as Mark's editorial explanation that *by saying this* Jesus made (it clear that) all foods (are) clean:

"Do you not see . . . passes on?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)
(RSV—similarly other modern translations)

The conclusion for the translator is that all cases of "if", "for" and other logical connectives in the original text need to be examined closely to see if they refer to the speech-situation—"(I am asking you this) because . . .", "If . . . (I can reasonably tell you that) . . ."—rather than to the other parts of the utterance itself. We also need to know how this sort of link is expressed in the target language: in some, a very similar use of logical link words is normal; in others it may be necessary to make the pragmatic reference explicit ("B, and therefore I tell you A"), which may involve restructuring to suit the logical system of the language, or the explanation may just be placed alongside the main point without any link in words—it may be marked by special intonation in speech, and writing may use some punctuation device such as dashes or brackets to show the explanatory status.

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FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

In recent issues we have included reports on training programs in different places. Here is a report on another different type of program which was held in the South Pacific last year.

People in the South Pacific region have a great love and respect for the Bible. The Bible has become very much part of their traditional way of life. The versions which are in use in the major languages are now quite old, and they are difficult to understand in places. But the people are very attached to these old versions, and there seems to be little desire for new translations.

There have been a number of requests over the years, from church leaders and others, for the Bible Society to provide helps along with the text of the Bible, to enable people to understand the Bible better. So it was in response to these requests that a Study Bible Seminar was arranged, and a group of people were invited to come together to discuss what might be done.

Those who attended were 16 men and women from the three largest Pacific Island countries, Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. Some of these people already had experience in translation work. And they represented a number of different churches. The Seminar was held in Suva, Fiji, over a period of 7 working days during July 1984.