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## READABILITY AND THE PREPARATION OF SCRIPTURES FOR CHILDREN

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Readability is concerned with the problem of matching reader and reading material. On the one hand there are individuals with varying interests and reading skills. On the other hand there exists a variety of reading materials which differ in content, style, and difficulty. It should be obvious that readability research is important for persons engaged in the preparation of Children's Scriptures. Our concern is to prepare translations that will be as effective as possible in reaching children with Scripture. Therefore, we need to be made aware of factors that will increase the readability of a Scripture text. In this work we must cooperate with people responsible for producing Scriptures, for readability involves not only the translation of texts, but also their arrangement and the format in which they are published.

In a book by John Gilliland entitled *Readability* the author discusses the subject under three topics: interests and motivation, visibility (legibility), and language. As translators our primary concern is with language, but it will be profitable for us to look briefly at the two other areas as well.

### INTEREST AND MOTIVATION

We are not concerned merely to capture a child's interest. But at the same time we recognize that it is impossible to reach a child through a biblical text that has no appeal to him. A number of studies have been made among English speakers regarding interest and motivation, and some of these studies apply just as well to other language situations.

The "principle of least effort" is important to keep in mind. It tells us that a person tries to obtain a given goal using the least possible effort. It has been discovered, for example, that preferences for reading material among college students were most frequently governed by the simplicity of the text, and that the students could even make accurate choices as to which text might be the easiest to read. The same study indicated that students more often chose simpler texts than they did difficult texts.

In a study in which high school and college students were requested to list factors that they felt made books readable, features of style were found to be most common. Among these were such things as "plain everyday English", "easy simple vocabulary", and "short paragraphs and sentences". Content was given second place, with frequent references to such aspects as action, suspense, and modern characters. The third most desired feature was format, with students preferring "not too many pages", and "not too many chapters". Organization was ranked last.

### VISIBILITY (LEGIBILITY)

Allen M. Blair has written an article entitled, "Everything you always wanted to know about readability but were afraid to ask". In this article he has something to say about the relation between readability and visibility.

*Readability is visibility.* Type large enough to read comfortably. Lines not so long that the eye has trouble finding the beginning of the next line. Paper and ink that lets type stand out sharply—black ink on whitish non-glare paper is best. Plenty of light, without glare. Distance between eyes and print close enough for comfortable reading, but not too close.

Publishers realize the value of visibility, and they have at times changed the format of a book to make it appear easier to read. This has frequently been done in Bible story books, and I recently noticed something similar in the so-called children's editions of the Living Bible and the New International Version. In both of these publications the text is the same as the regular edition, but an attractive cover and colorful pictures have been added to encourage parents to purchase these publications for their children.

#### LANGUAGE

As we might expect, most of the research on readability has centred about the matter of language. Educators have tried to define precisely what aspects of language can be measured, and the result of this research has been the development of a number of readability formulas. Many of the reading formulas depend too much on sentence length as the standard of measurement. And all of the reading formulas are too related to cultural features to be of much value outside the English-speaking world. Nevertheless, there are certain universal aspects of language that must be considered when we translate for children.

#### Vocabulary

In the selection of vocabulary items for children, there are at least four matters that need to be taken into account:

**Word length.** It is usually assumed that long words are more difficult than short words, and this is generally the case. The difficulty of a word is often directly related to the number of letters and the number of syllables in the word. But this is not always so, especially when a long word is familiar and/or made up of familiar parts. For example, the word "grandfather" is less difficult for a child than is the word "ocher".

**Abstractness.** There is no unanimous agreement on the meaning of the term "abstractness". Nevertheless, nearly every one agrees that it does have an influence on the difficulty of words. For example, in a test it was shown that nouns referring to internal mental states significantly increased the difficulty of a passage.

**Frequency.** For a long while it has been known that frequency has some influence on the difficulty that people have in understanding a given word. Recent studies have confirmed this fact and have even indicated that the matter of frequency is of more importance than has been traditionally realized. However, a word of caution is due. We should be aware of the difference between word *frequency* and word *familiarity*. Some very infrequently used words may be well known because of the reader's experience and background. For example, someone from a farm will have a different vocabulary than someone from a city.

**Technical Terms.** Children's literature is not a stranger to technical terms. However, creative writers for children are the masters of the texts which they produce, and so they have complete control of the language situation into which they introduce unusual words and phrases. This is not the case for the Bible translator. We do not control the text; instead the text controls what we may or may not write. We cannot create an artificial setting for the stories of the Bible, because we are bound by the original context.

Every translator has faced the problem of translating technical terms such as "Kingdom of God", "Messiah", and "Son of Man". But we must also develop an awareness of those everyday words that may be used in the biblical culture in a way quite different from what our readers expect. For example, every first grade child knows the meaning of "call" as a verb. But precisely because children *do* know what it means in everyday English, they are likely to miss its meaning in a specialized context such as "called by God to preach his Good News".

There is another type of technical term that we need to consider to. Certain words automatically call attention to themselves and distract the child's full attention from the understanding of the overall text. For example, the words "circumcise" and "circumcision" will require an explanation; and as soon as explanation is given (especially in a mixed group), what need is there to proceed with the reading of the text? Heber Peacock and I attempted to bring out the *significance* of the act without drawing attention to its *form* in the Old Testament Children's Scriptures that we prepared. (For example, "As a sign that you are keeping this promise, you must *dedicate* every male in your family to me. Your family must always do this." Gen 17.10-11) For children it is not necessary to mention that Rahab was a prostitute: "The spies got to Jericho and spent the night in the house of a *woman* named Rahab." (Joshua 2.1)

### Syntax (Grammar)

Sentence length has frequently been used as the primary test of grammatical difficulty, but there are at least two errors involved in this sort of measurement. First, sentences of the same length are not necessarily equally difficult. Second, this does not measure a natural unit of language, because we cannot drop a few words from the end of a sentence and expect it to become automatically easier.

Two grammatical factors are more important in determining sentence difficulty than is sentence length.

**Naturalness.** Sentence structure that follows what the reader expects will make reading easier than a sentence that contradicts the reader's expectation. The following two sentences are difficult, because the arrangement is unnatural:

"These twelve Jesus sent out."

"The poor you will always have with you."

**Memory Load.** The more grammatical facts a reader must retain in his memory before completing a sentence, the more likely he is to misunderstand the sentence. Consider the following translation of Luke 11.38. The sentence is short, but it is difficult because of the distance between subject and predicate:

"The Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised."

Note also the following translation of Mark 10.46, which is difficult for similar reasons:

“As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging.”

### The Paragraph and beyond

Everyone engaged in Bible translation has become increasingly aware of the necessity to go beyond the sentence in studying the structure and meaning of a text. If for no other reason, it is that a sentence cannot be understood adequately, or its degree of readability accurately measured, apart from the whole context in which it appears. For example, “They are eating apples” has a number of possible meanings when it is not seen in its context. It may be a response to the question “What are the children doing?” or to “Are those apples for cooking or eating?” We can only understand the correct meaning of this simple sentence when it is placed within its proper context.

Recently I tried to list some of the things that Heber Peacock and I had done at the paragraph level to increase the readability of the text. I noticed the following items:

**Repetition.** Children generally have a greater appreciation for repetition than adults do. (a) *Noun/pronoun*. We all know the importance of identifying a character by name before referring to that person by a pronoun. But in translating for children, it is even more important to give careful consideration to this factor. (b) *Verb phrase/noun phrase* (of the same root). For stylistic reasons it is sometimes helpful to alternate between verb phrases and noun phrases in describing the same experience within a given paragraph. This is a feature which has to do with style as well as with readability. For children we have often followed the principle of introducing the verb phrase first, then following it later in the paragraph with a noun phrase (if not by the repetition of the initial verb phrase itself). (c) *Complete thought/partial thought*. In Romans “justified us” was initially translated by the verb phrase “pardoned our sins and let us be his people”. However, rather than to repeat the entire phrase in each occurrence of it within the same paragraph (or within separate paragraphs close together), sometimes only the first half (“pardoned our sins”) was used. (d) *Specific general* or *specific/general/specific*, or the reverse of these two. This too represents an attempt to clothe the same idea in a different garment. As a general rule, there seems to be a higher degree of readability in the order *specific/general* than in the reverse order. (e) *Direct statement/suggestion*. Occasionally an idea may be repeated by way of suggestion or implication. This requires great care, and the translator must be certain that the child reader will easily draw the same implications from the text as he does himself. (f) *Active/passive*. As a general rule we avoid the use of passive constructions when translating for children. Nevertheless, an occasional passive may make for more interesting reading, especially if it follows an active construction which expresses the same thought. (g) *Non-metaphor/metaphor*. Metaphors are always likely to cause problems, but sometimes they are difficult or impossible to avoid. Occasionally, the difficulty of a metaphor may be

somewhat lessened if a non-metaphorical statement of the same thought is placed before it.

**Expected language patterns.** Regardless of how much reading a child has done on his own or how much he has been read to, his primary encounter with language is through the *spoken* word. The most successful children's authors (and children's TV programmes!) take this factor seriously. Syntax which is too simple, while perhaps not breaking any rules of grammar, certainly tends to violate rules of clarity. Similarly, a paragraph composed of a series of choppy sentences and which does not conform to what children expect in speech is more difficult to process than are longer sentences that reflect these expected patterns.

**Relationship (sequence).** There are certain thought patterns which are apparently universal. Four of these are: (1) relationship involving a whole and its parts, (2) relationship of cause and effect, (3) relationship based upon a sequence (such as time or process), and (4) relationship based upon comparison and contrast. It is then logical to conclude that the readability of a paragraph will increase if its structure reflects one or more of these common thought patterns. Frequently translations fail to be sufficiently readable because the translators were too anxious to preserve traditional verse and chapter numbers. A worthwhile exercise is that of translating a biblical passage with the verse numbers removed. It is also an interesting experiment to have someone unfamiliar with the Bible translate a paragraph in which the verse numbers have been removed and the verses slightly rearranged.

### Style and Related Matters

The manner in which material is presented often determine its acceptability by the reader. For this reason, careful attention must be given to consideration of style. In the article previously referred to by Blair, there are three important paragraphs which refer to style. These paragraphs are brief and to the point, and so I quote them in full:

**Readability is excitement.** A punchy beginning. Forceful and colorful language. Variety in style, including both long and short sentences. A subject that appeals to the reader. Interesting pictures and others illustrations.

**Readability is familiarity.** Plain talk and an informal style, especially for readers with difficulty in standard English. The words and expressions of ordinary speech. The familiar sentence patterns of spoken language. Material that deals with something the reader knows about and has experience with. Unfamiliar ideas explained in terms of familiar ideas.

**Readability is clarity.** A low percentage of abstract words. Difficult ideas explained and not clumped together. Paragraphs not too long or complicated. Ideas developed in logical order. Introductions and summaries where suitable.

**New ideas/old ideas.** Any object, event, or concept which comes as new information to a child reader should be regarded as increasing the degree of diffi-

culty within the text. Something may be considered new information either when it has not been mentioned previously (or recently) within the text itself or when it is outside the previous experience of the reader. This suggests that we need to know both how familiar the potential reader is with Scripture and the real life background of the reader. A text intended to be read in isolation from other passages of Scripture may therefore require the inclusion of background information and other material which it is not necessary for a text that is the third or fourth in a series, for example.

**Cultural items.** Objects and events that exist both within the biblical culture and the reader's own culture may not be as difficult to process as are those which exist only within the biblical culture. This, of course, we all know. However, an object or event which exists in both cultures may prove a greater difficulty for the reader than a new object or event, if its significance is not the same in the two cultures. For example, "sacrifice" as an event exists in many cultures, but the interpretation of this event in many instances is significantly different from the biblical concept of sacrifice. People in all cultures are familiar with blood, but as an object within the Jewish sacrificial system it has a totally different significance than it has in many other cultures.

**Concrete/abstract.** Ideas and concepts are more difficult for readers to process than are events or objects, especially if the object or event is illustrated by a picture within the text. We need to give careful attention to the matter of repetition, either full or in part, in dealing with many of the abstract concepts in Children's Scriptures.

**Density of concepts.** Here I refer to the frequency with which new information is introduced into the text. I might merely suggest several things that we can do—thin it out, slow it down, repeat it, and use more frequent section headings.

**Interesting/uninteresting.** Passages that are dull tend to lose reader interest. The more interesting the subject matter, the more involvement we can expect from the reader, and, consequently, the higher the degree of readability. If there are biblical passages which are dull, but which we consider vital for the needs of the child reader, then we should give attention to features of style that will make the reading of these passages more enjoyable.

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## SCRIPTURE CASSETTES

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Putting the scriptures on to cassette is easy to do badly, and difficult to do well. Many people think that all you need is good recording equipment and someone who can read. The reader reads, the recorder records, and click—one scripture cassette is ready! Every word from the scripture passage is on the cassette, so surely there can be no problems.