

SOME PROBLEMS WITH “US” AND “WE”

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In the preface to the New International Version of the Bible, the Committee on Translation correctly notes: “Because thought patterns and syntax differ from language to language, faithful communication of the meaning of the writers of the Bible demands frequent modification in sentence structure . . .” This is an important observation, because no two languages are exactly alike in their structure. For example, the structure of a Greek sentence is not the same as the structure of an English sentence. The New Testament was originally written in Greek, and so when we translate it from Greek into English, we must take seriously the differences in the sentence structure of these two languages.

WHAT HAPPENED TO “US”?

A look at the last half of Matthew 8.25 will illustrate what is meant by this question. In Greek this half-verse consists only of three words, which the RSV translates: “Save, Lord; we are perishing.” We will not now concern ourselves here with the problems of translating the word “Lord”, except to note that in Greek the order is, “Lord, save . . .”. Evidently for the sake of style the RSV translators changed the order of words in the Greek sentence to read: “Save, Lord . . .”. My concern at present is actually with a word that does not appear in RSV; the word is “us”. If we read this verse in the King James Version, we note that “us” is included in their translation: “Lord, save us: we perish.”

It is common knowledge that we do not have any of the original manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. We also know that the manuscripts which we do have frequently differ from one another. This is the reason for the difference between the RSV (“Save, Lord . . .”) and the KJV (“Lord, save us . . .”). The best manuscripts available to Bible translators at the time that the KJV was translated did include “us” in the Greek text. But since that time earlier and better Greek manuscripts have been discovered, and in these manuscripts the pronoun “us” is absent. So the RSV translators have followed the best Greek manuscripts of the New Testament available to them in leaving out “us” from their translation. This is a valid principle. We must follow the best available Greek manuscripts.

However, there is another principle involved in translation. That is, we must consider the structure of the language into which we are translating. In English, for example, we normally expect an object to follow the verb “save”, and it sounds awkward to us when the object is omitted. For this reason a number of modern English translations include “us”, even though they are following the best Greek manuscripts where the word does *not* occur. NIV, apparently following the same Greek text as RSV, translates: “Lord, save us!” The same is true of the Jerusalem Bible and the New English Bible, both of which render: “Save us, Lord . . .”

WHO ARE “WE”?

“We are perishing” translates one word in the Greek text. The word is a verb, but the form of the Greek verb indicates that the subject is “we”. It is no

real problem to translate this into English, even though the Greek and English structures differ from one another. But suppose we want to translate “We are perishing” into Indonesian. Then there is a very serious question that we must face. *Who* is included in the pronoun “we”? Does Peter refer just to himself and the disciples, or does he include Jesus as well? The problem is that in Indonesian there are two forms of the pronoun “we”. One of these forms (*kami*) means “we who are speaking, but not you who are spoken to”. The other form (*kita*) means “we who are speaking *and* you who are spoken to”. If a translator uses *kami* to translate “we”, then Jesus is not included. But if the translator uses *kita* to translate “we”, then Jesus is included.

“US” AGAIN

Let’s return now to the problem of translating the two words, “Lord, save.” What happens when we try to translate this sentence into Indonesian? There also the verb “save” requires an object, we must translate either “Lord, save *us*” or “Save *us*, Lord.” But in Indonesian the same problem exists with “us” as with “we”. There are two forms of the pronoun: one excludes the person addressed, and the other includes him. So what was Peter saying to Jesus? Was he saying, “Lord, save *us* (your disciples, but not you)” or “Lord, save *us* (all of us, including you)”?

The choice of an exclusive or inclusive form of “we/us” is not easy, as we begin to realize. And, moreover, it was a question which in all probability would never have arisen in the mind of Matthew, since neither Aramaic nor Greek has separate exclusive and inclusive forms of the first person plural pronoun.

DECISIONS! DECISIONS!

A final decision regarding the choice of an exclusive or inclusive form of the pronoun “we/us” is directly related to the interpretation of the word rendered “Lord” by most translations. In New Testament times this word had a variety of meanings, which are well summarized by Markus Barth in his commentary on Ephesians:

“Lord” is the title given to an owner of slaves or of other property (Matt. 20.8; Gal. 4.1; John 13.16) and to a person who is addressed, as by “Mr.,” “Sir” (Matt. 25.11; Acts 16.30). “Lord” is also used to exalt potentates; increasingly the title includes the attribution of divine characteristics (Matt. 22.43; Acts 25.26). Finally, “Lord” is used for describing a deity in cultic action and confession (1 Cor. 12.3; Philip. 2.11). (Volume I, page 72, footnote 55.)

For translation the choice is then between “Lord” in the full Christian understanding of the word, and an honorific, basically equivalent to “Sir”. In some languages, such as German, we may be ambiguous, for in German the word *Herr* may mean either “Sir” or “Lord”. However, in most languages a decision has to be made, because there is no one word that will satisfactorily convey both meanings.

Matthew obviously wrote his Gospel in the light of the Easter faith: he knew that God had raised Jesus from death and had made him Lord of heaven and earth. But what of the disciples at the time when this event of Matthew 8.25 takes place? Had they yet come to a full recognition of who Jesus is? Does Matthew at this point in his Gospel portray them as full-fledged believers or as men still struggling to discover who Jesus really is?

Decisions! Decisions! For languages which distinguish between inclusive and exclusive forms of the pronoun, I would prefer to use the inclusive. As a general rule, we should use the inclusive form whenever in doubt. And for this particular context, the inclusive form appears preferable. This would in no way deny the deity of Jesus; it would assume rather that at this point in Jesus' ministry his disciples did not fully recognize who he was and so may have assumed that he would have drowned together with them. The Common Indonesian translation has the inclusive form *kita*, while the Common Malay has the exclusive form *kami*!

But what of the other decision, the choice between an honorific and the title "Lord"? For me at least this decision is more difficult, but I would prefer the honorific. In English this may require taking out the noun of address altogether (as the Good News Bible 4th Edition has done with "woman/mother" at John 2.4). In Indonesian/Malay it would require a noun of address that could be used of a respected teacher. The Common Indonesian uses the honorific *Pak*, while the Common Malay uses *Tuhan*, meaning "Lord"!

YOU CAN'T WIN THEM ALL!

This paragraph is an aside, a departure from the main concern of the article. But I discover an excellent opportunity here to make a statement regarding one aspect of the task of the Translation Consultant. He is a *consultant*, not a boss! His job is to provide information and guidance, not to force people to do what he says. It may come as a surprise that the same consultant worked with both the Common Indonesian and the Common Malay New Testaments. And the one which he worked most closely with, is the one which differs with him on both decisions! Where valid alternative renderings are possible, the translator should always have the final word. The consultant will move on to work with other languages, but the translator must live with the translation and with the people who use it.

NOTES

The "true saying" in 1 Timothy 3.1

The 3rd edition of the UBS Greek New Testament (1975) and the 26th edition of the Nestle-Aland text (1979) are "identical so far as their wording is concerned", "yet there remain differences between them in paragraphing, orthography, and punctuation" (Introduction to Nestle-Aland 26th edition, page 42*).

Such details may seem quite unimportant for translators, yet in at least one place, 1 Tim 3.1, a change of paragraphing makes an important change of meaning.

GNB translates: "This is a true saying: If a man is eager to be a church leader, he desires an excellent work". This follows the UBS text, and earlier editions of Nestle-Aland. I have consulted over twenty translations of this verse, and almost all of them take the "true saying" to be the words *which*