

PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

*Published twice yearly
(April and October)
by the United Bible
Societies*

Vol. 25, No. 2, April 1974

EDITOR: Euan Fry

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Dorothy F. Jenks

Published under the editorial supervision of the United Bible Societies Sub-Committee on Helps for Translators.

EUGENE A. NIDA

WHAT ARE LITERACY SELECTIONS?

Dr. Eugene A. Nida is World Translations Research Coordinator for the United Bible Societies.

Many readers of The Bible Translator will already know about the Bible Societies campaign which is called "Good News for New Readers". This is a massive program, planned in 1972 and begun in 1973, to reach new readers everywhere with specially chosen and prepared Scriptures.

Dr. Nida has been deeply involved in the preparation of materials for use in this new reader program, and so he was asked to write this article for The Bible Translator on the nature and purpose of literacy selections.

Translators who desire further information about the selections should contact the UBS Translations Consultant for their area. Consultants are able to supply translators' notes on the selections, and samples of the selections in English and other languages.—Editor.

Some people imagine that a literacy selection from the Bible consists simply of a standard text printed in large letters, in short lines, and with attractive illustrations. Others think of a literacy selection as a text in which common words are substituted for all the uncommon ones and in which no sentence has more than ten words. Still others suppose that a literacy selection should sound like sentences from a primer—*Mary sees the cat and the cat sees Mary*. But the literacy selections being published by the Bible Societies are something quite different. Essentially, these literacy selections have three basic features: they are short, relevant, and self-contained; that is to say, one does not have to have additional information in order to understand them. But in order to appreciate something of what is involved in producing such selections, especially from the standpoint of the translator and editor, one must consider several different aspects, including vocabulary, grammar, content, format, and arrangement.

Vocabulary

As a means of demonstrating some of the basic differences in vocabulary between a traditional, standard translation and a literacy selection, it may be

useful to compare the text of Luke 12:13–15 in the Revised Standard Version and in the proposed literacy selection in English.

Revised Standard Version

One of the multitude said to him, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?" And he said to them, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness, for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Literacy Selection

A man in the crowd said to Jesus,
 "Teacher, tell my brother
 to give me my share of the property
 which our father left us."
 Jesus answered him,
 "Man, who gave me the right to be a judge,
 or to divide property between you two?"
 Then Jesus went on to say to the people,
 "Watch out!
 Beware of every kind of greed.
 A person does not truly live
 just because he owns a lot of things.
 This is true no matter how rich he may be."

In the first place, the literacy selection employs simpler, better known terms, where the RSV may have long and quite complex ones. In place of "multitude" (RSV) the literacy selection has "crowd", and instead of "covetousness" the literacy selection employs "greed". The literacy selection also avoids words that are really no longer in common usage, even though they may be quite simple. For example, in place of "bid my brother", the literacy selection has simply "tell my brother", and instead of "take heed", the literacy selection has "watch out".

When one can readily substitute simple words for difficult ones, there is no great problem for the translator, but trouble begins with a word like "inheritance". In the first place, it is a long and relatively unfamiliar term for new readers, and in the second place, it is a very complex term, in the sense that it has included within its meaning so many different concepts. The various aspects of the meaning of this term are called by linguists "the semantic components", which might also be called the "parts of the meaning". For example, the important parts of the meaning of "inheritance" are (1) property (normally of considerable value), (2) passed on to heirs, who are usually members of the same family or close relatives, (3) in accordance with certain legal or customary procedures. There is no other single term in English which may be substituted for "inheritance", and so one has to construct an equivalent phrase which will include the essential parts of the meaning. For the literacy level it comes out as "my share of the property which our father left us".

Grammar

In producing a literacy selection for new readers it is important to express the various types of meanings by the kinds of words which most easily represent the meanings in question. In so far as possible events (or happenings) are therefore expressed by verbs, objects are represented by nouns, and qualities and quantities are expressed by adjectives, adverbs, or even by simpler means of indicating "how much" or "what kind". For example, in place of saying "divider over you", it is clearer to use a verb, "to divide property between you two" and instead of merely "life" it is preferable to use a phrase such as "truly live", especially since in this passage the meaning is not mere existence, but the true quality of life. The clause "life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" is especially difficult since it combines a word of quantity, "abundance", with a noun which really indicates the relation of being an owner. It is clearer to say "a person does not truly live just because he owns a lot of things. This is true no matter how rich he may be." This might appear to be drawing out the original expression rather too much, but in reality this is what is meant by the Greek New Testament text.

The translator of literacy selections tries to use those words and grammatical forms which most clearly fit the context. Linguists who deal with what is called "information theory" speak of this kind of agreement with the context as involving "high transitional probabilities", but this is just a high-sounding phrase to describe what is really a very simple concept. What is meant is that the wording should be so clear and simple that the new reader has the greatest likelihood of guessing the right word. That is to say, the text is so well constructed that every word fits perfectly into place—the story almost "reads itself". Linguists have very complex ways of analyzing these so-called transitional probabilities and one technique, called the "Cloze Technique", involves dropping out every fifth or tenth word, and then testing the ability of people to fill in or guess the right term. But for a practical test there are even easier procedures. For example, one can have several readers read a text aloud, while the translator notes carefully all the points at which such readers unduly hesitate, repeat, substitute other words, or seem confused. If two or more readers have similar difficulties at the same point in the text, one should immediately examine such a spot for underlying difficulties.

Content

In producing a literacy selection it is sometimes necessary to be somewhat more specific than the original text. In the RSV two phrases are translated literally: "he said to him" (verse 14) and "he said to them" (verse 15). In the literacy selection the first is rendered as "Jesus answered him" and the second is translated as "then Jesus went on to say to the people". It is very easy for a new reader, who inevitably reads rather slowly, to forget who are the ones involved in the dialogue. Therefore one must specify "Jesus" as the speaker and make it quite clear that in the second case Jesus has turned to the crowd and is making a comment which applies to everyone.

In other instances, it may be wise to eliminate some of the content which is not immediately relevant to a particular story. For example, in Matthew

22:34–40, the first part reads “but when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him” (RSV). But for an account of the two great commandments, it is really not necessary to include what the Pharisees had learned about Jesus’ earlier reply to the Sadducees. What is important is that “some men came together to try to trick Jesus into saying the wrong thing” and that is precisely how the revised literacy selection reads.

The translator who is asked to prepare a literacy selection should not undertake such a task without some very careful initial instruction. First, he should read Dr. Wonderly’s book on *Bible Translations for Popular Use* and follow this up with a close examination of the book entitled *Theory and Practice of Translation* (by Nida and Taber). For several books of the New Testament he can draw upon helps to be found in some of the Translator’s Handbooks (Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, and 1–3 John are already in print). A set of *Notes on Literacy Selections* has already been published for Series A and B, and in process of publication is a corresponding set of notes for Series C, D, and E, as well as for some supplementary selections for Series A and B. Plans are also being made to include some Old Testament selections which may be incorporated into these various series.

Format

One of the very important aspects of the format of literacy selections is the indentation, which is recommended for Series A, B, C, and D. (Series E is printed in regular paragraphs so as to prepare new readers for more ordinary published materials.) Each line is designed to represent more or less a single “thought unit”, while the degree of indentation reflects the ways in which the various thoughts are related to one another. The unevenness of the right-hand and left-hand margins is also an important help to new readers in ready “eye-return”.

The pictures are also an important aspect of literacy selections. Their purpose is not merely to decorate, but rather to attract attention and to help tell the story. This help in “telling the story” is a very important aid to the new reader.

The size and shape of the letters are also important. They must be large enough and black enough, and without the distracting extra hooks and extensions which many fancy type-faces have. But even more important than anything else is the proportionate amount of white space.

Arrangement

Basically Series A through E are designed to represent a progressively more complex series of selections—more complex in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and content. Most of the earlier selections are completely narrative, while a number of the later selections are what can be called “expository”, that is to say, they explain ideas and events. Within any one series there is no attempt to indicate what order should be followed in another language, for the degree of difficulty in another language depends upon the problems of each receptor language and culture. In some instances one may even wish to move one

selection from one series to another. It is also recognized that not all the selections in Series A and B are fully appropriate in all languages, and hence some may be dropped or others substituted from the supplementary series of eight selections. Furthermore, a series of Old Testament selections is being planned which may be added to certain of the series or substituted for selections which may not seem quite satisfactory.

The Use of Literacy Selections

Literacy selections can never take the place of a primer, but they do constitute an indispensable addition to a primer. Few persons are able to move directly from the primer level to the level of commonly published materials without the help of some transitional literature, prepared especially with the new reader in mind. The almost total lack of such material in most languages makes the publication of literacy selections so important.

But it is difficult to understand just how useful these can be merely on the basis of the English samples, since the new reader of English normally requires so much more transitional material than new readers in other languages, simply because the spelling system of English is so terribly inconsistent. There are so many sounds that are written in different ways and so many instances of the same sequence of letters pronounced in different manners (compare, for example, *ough* in *though*, *cough*, *through*, and *thought*). A Spanish-speaking child after two years of schooling can usually read much better than an English-speaking child after five years of schooling. Fortunately, most languages are far more consistent in spelling than is English and hence readers can progress much more rapidly toward ability to handle commonly published materials.

The Importance of Literacy Selections

Literacy selections from the Bible have a number of important advantages over other materials. First, there is usually genuine and widespread interest in the stories of the Bible. They touch a responsive chord of interest in millions of people. One reason for this is that the Bible is such a translatable book, no doubt one of the most translatable religious books that has ever been written. It came from the western end of what has often been called "the fertile crescent" (that crescent of land extending from Palestine, north through Syria and over to the Mesopotamia River Valley), and it was through that part of the world and radiating out from that region that one finds more traits of culture and ideas than for any other region in the history of the world. So many people find in the Bible such a close reflection of their own ways of life. There are some persons who think that a document written some 2,000 to 3,000 years ago could not possibly have meaning for people today, but no new sin has been invented in the last 2,000 years and no new basic human concern has come to light.

The importance of providing literacy selections for new readers is highlighted by the fact that transitional material constitutes the greatest lack in literacy programs today. Furthermore, these selections can be of the greatest help to the most untouched group which is readily reachable, namely, the

adolescents and adults who are dropouts from earlier literacy programs and who may have retained some minimal knowledge of reading but who simply never progressed far enough to become regular readers. In addition, the Bible Societies are in a unique position to work effectively through really concerned persons and groups—in churches, missions, and governments—who can use these helps for new readers to assist millions of people to move from functional illiteracy to the point where they can become fully participating members in an increasingly complex, literate world. In the process, they can also have the opportunity to become acquainted with the most important message which has ever been communicated to men—the Word of God.

DAVID J. CLARK

DIFFERENT “TYPES” OF LITERATURE

Dr. David Clark is a UBS Translations Consultant, based in Bangkok, Thailand.

The Task We Face

We often see references to different “literary types”, or as they are sometimes called “genres”. This article will try to make it clearer what these terms involve, and how they affect Bible translators, especially those translating into their mother tongue.

The Labels We Use

When we look at the literature of the Bible, we find it convenient to divide it into various classes of writing. In doing this, we try to bring together those books or sections which have something in common with each other, and give them a label that will help us to remember their common features. The labels we use (in English) would include History, Prophecy, Hymns, Proverbs, Riddles, Gospels, Parables, Letters and so on. A complete list would be quite long, and different scholars would have different views on what should be included in it!

The idea of using such labels is a good one, but we sometimes find ourselves puzzled to know exactly what a given label means. Sometimes labels that we might assume draw attention to the same kind of feature, actually place emphasis on different kinds of features. It is important to realize that the labels we use are not all related to each other along one scale, like the rungs of a ladder. They are more like the steel rods or pieces of bamboo in a scaffolding, which are related to each other in several dimensions. We shall next try to see what sort of features our labels represent.

The Features We Recognize

One of the most obvious features of a piece of writing is its size. Some of the labels we use clearly carry information about the length of the work they refer to. We naturally expect a novel to be longer than a short story. Likewise,