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TRANSLATORS ARE BORN NOT MADE

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Most people assume that if a person speaks two languages well, he can easily interpret or translate from one to another. Up to a point this is true. But there are persons who speak two languages, and speak them well, and yet have great difficulty in transferring information from one language to the other. A relatively well-educated rancher in the southern part of Mexico, who used the Tzeltal language freely in speaking to his employees, and who was also fully capable of communicating effectively in Spanish, his mother tongue, was nevertheless incapable of transferring a statement from Spanish into Tzeltal. He would fumble badly for words and finally come out with a statement in Tzeltal which was a poor equivalent of what had been said in Spanish. One reason for this difficulty seemed to be the fact that he had learned the two languages in entirely different contexts. Furthermore, he used the two languages for almost entirely different situations. But even with special training in translation techniques, some people seem to have difficulty in grasping the principle of language equivalence. On the other hand, there are people who would not seem to be potential translators, but who nevertheless do have hidden capacities for transferring messages from one language to another. With a certain amount of training these persons may master with remarkable effectiveness the required techniques.

I have discussed this matter of the ability to translate with a number of people, including the heads of six important training institutes and with a dozen or more individuals responsible for selecting and directing translation programs. When I asked about the qualifications for a potential translator, the usual answer was that such individuals must know two languages well and be acquainted with the subject matter being translated or interpreted. Some mentioned another qualification, a so-called "verbal facility", which is simply a ready ability to use words in order to express ideas effectively. However, in further discussion practically all of these specialists admitted that it is extremely difficult to test in advance what a person's potential as a translator or an interpreter may be. Various tests are used, involving intelligence, language knowledge, breadth of literary exposure, and the ability to write effectively in one's mother tongue. But none of these tests seem to show very well how effective a person might eventually prove to be as a translator. Even

asking potential translators to translate a sample passage does not give much insight into their capabilities, since many people have quite the wrong idea (no doubt based largely upon their school experience) as to what a translation really should be. Nevertheless, on the basis of three or four weeks participation in a training program for translators, most directors of such programs can predict with a high degree of accuracy what a trainee's future success as a translator is likely to be.

CREATIVE IMAGINATION

When I have had opportunity to discuss fully with experienced translators and teachers of translation what the key element in translation success is likely to be, it has seemed that ultimately the most important factor is creative imagination. Some people have this capacity, and others simply do not have it. This capacity can, in fact, often be tested in terms of a person's ability to understand a message in his mother tongue.

Creative imagination with regard to language is not a completely black-or-white matter, for there are varying degrees of this capacity. And a person who has some native ability in this area can always have his skills improved by training. But without some inborn capacity for understanding and transmitting messages, a person's potential as a translator will certainly be limited.

THE CAPACITY TO RECOGNIZE PROBLEMS

What precisely do we mean by the expression "creative imagination"? First, it means a capacity to spot problems in the source-language text, including especially an ability to detect things which are difficult to understand and things which can have more than one meaning. For example, a person needs to see that the phrase "the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 2.20) can have two quite different meanings. Either it is the foundation which the apostles and the prophets laid, or it is the foundation which consists of what the apostles and prophets said, or perhaps even of what they were. A good translator does not need to come up immediately with the right answer to a problem, but he must be able to recognize almost immediately the fact that the problem exists and what the possible different meanings are. After that, he can begin to look for the correct meaning, consulting good commentaries and other reliable sources of information. Unless a translator is aware of how tricky words are, he simply will not be conscious of what he does not know and therefore will be in danger of making all kinds of errors.

A translator must also be able to spot statements which do not really make sense. For example, in Ephesians 3.8 Paul declares that he is "less than the least of all God's people". It is obviously impossible to be "less than the least"; and to translate this statement literally into some languages would result in something which would seem to be complete nonsense. A person who really has the capacity for translation needs to be able to see that saying "less than the least" is simply a way of saying "the very least".

A translator also needs to be able to recognize figurative expressions which at first sight appear to be completely non-figurative. For example, in Ephesians 5.18 the text speaks of "being filled with the Spirit". Many persons do not recognize this phrase as a figure of speech. Yet the Spirit is surely not something which can be poured into a person in the way that water may be poured

into a basin or sand into a box. A translator must immediately recognize that this is a figurative form of language, and that he must explore how the essential content of this expression may be rendered in another language. It may be necessary to say, for example, "to be completely possessed by the Spirit" or "to have the Spirit direct all that he does". A failure to recognize figurative expressions may result in a translation which is completely absurd. For example, a literal translation into another language of Ephesians 2.14 (GNB), "With his own body he broke down the wall that separated them", might cause readers to assume that he destroyed the wall by crashing his body against it. The phrase "with his own body" refers, of course, to the physical death of Christ. But "the wall" is simply a figurative expression for the enmity and the hostility existing between Jews and Gentiles. What this really means is that by his dying Christ got rid of that enmity and hostility. This is the meaning which must be communicated in the language of the translation. In form it should come as close to the original Greek text as possible and at the same time in a way which will not be misunderstood by the ordinary reader.

It is also important for translators to recognize mixed figures of speech. In fact, these expressions produce a number of serious problems in transferring thoughts from one language to another. In Ephesians 3.17 the term "rooted" in the expression "rooted and founded in love" suggests not only a matter of stability, but also and even more likely, the source of life and vitality. At the same time the term "founded" seems to refer directly to the basis for understanding the true meaning of the love of Christ. In the Revised Standard Version part of the figurative mixture is removed by speaking of "being rooted and grounded in love". However, in present-day English "grounded" refers very frequently to an airplane that cannot take off. The New English Bible attempts to make the double metaphor a bit clearer by translating "with deep roots and firm foundations". Just how all the meaning contained in this mixed figure of speech can best be translated into a given language will largely depend on the resources of that language; but for the potential translator what is important is a sensitivity to such mixed metaphors and to the difficulty which these are likely to cause in another language.

Another problem which translators face is "unexpected" meanings. So many times we read a text in our own language or even in a language such as Greek or Hebrew which we have learned, and we never realize the potential problems of transferring this meaning into another language. For example, the phrase "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1.3) can be taken in some languages to refer to two different persons, "God" and "Father". This construction using the word "and" in Greek and in English actually involves two references to the same person, so that in many languages it must be rendered as "God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". In some other languages it may be better expressed as: "God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ".

Another word which is often misleading is the word "remember", as in Ephesians 1.16, "I remember you in my prayers". Does this mean that Paul had forgotten about the people and then, as he prayed, happened to remember them? The meaning, of course, is simply "I talk to God about you in my prayers".

Even singulars and plurals may cause some difficulty. For example, in Ephesians 5.25 the expression “husbands, love your wives” could be understood to mean that husbands as a group should love their wives as a group—an indirect endorsement of polygamy! The translator needs to recognize that the real meaning here is that each husband should love his own wife.

In view of all that I have said above, it should be clear that potential translators should also have some capacity to recognize seeming contradictions or at least expressions which will appear to be contradictions in a given language. The phrase “sweet smelling sacrifice” in Ephesians 5.2 certainly seems contradictory to many peoples, for sacrifices were normally burned, at least partially, and the smell of burning flesh, hair and hide, does not seem to most people to be “sweet”! The New English Bible has “sacrifice whose fragrance is pleasing to God” and the Good News Bible has simply “sacrifice that pleases God”. It is possible for most English-speaking people to think of a sacrifice as having a sweet fragrance, but for anyone who has smelled sacrifices being burned, such an expression certainly does present problems.

In some instances it is simply the manner in which we translate one part of a text which suggests a contradiction with another part of it. If in Ephesians 5.26 we translate the Greek term usually rendered “sanctify” or “consecrate” as “dedicate to God” then it may seem contradictory in the next verse to indicate that Christ determines to present the church to itself.

Contradictory expressions may even arise from the use of too many words. Thus, in translating Ephesians 6.5 the use of an expression such as “human masters” or “masters according to the flesh” can cause difficulties. People may rightly ask, “What kind of a master or boss can a person have who is not human or is not composed of flesh?” The Greek text has the term *kurios*, a word frequently translated “Lord” because it is used as a title for Christ or God. Therefore the addition of “according to the flesh” (meaning “human”) to distinguish the lords referred to here from the divine Lord, is completely appropriate in Greek. But in other languages it may be better to use an ordinary and simple term meaning “master”, “boss”, or “employer”, since these terms almost always include the meaning contained in the Greek expression “according to the flesh”.

THE CAPACITY TO SENSE WAYS OF COMMUNICATING

In the second place, creative imagination with regard to language must have some reference to a capacity to sense ways of communicating meaningfully in a particular language. In fact, a translator should always read and study the source language text through the tinted glasses of the language he is translating into. In the discussion of “light” and “darkness” in Ephesians 5.8–14, we should immediately become sensitive to the problems of the kind of “light” and the kind of “darkness” involved in the figurative discourse. Does this “light” come from a source such as the sun, a fire, or a light bulb? Or is it a more even light like the light of day? Similarly, what is the “darkness”? Is it the darkness of a closed room or cave, or is it the darkness of night? Languages may have quite different terms for these various kinds of light and darkness, and there may be significant differences in what people understand by such terms.

In speaking of "the love of Christ" we must, of course, know whether this is a person's love for Christ or Christ's love for people. And what is the quality of the "love"? Is it similar to the love of parents for children, of a husband for a wife, or the love a person might have for himself? In English we can use the term "love" for a number of relationships: "to love your wife", "to love God", "to love ice cream", and "to love your work" (to name only a few), ideas which are expressed in quite different ways in most other languages.

The creative imagination for how we should communicate in a given language often involves the capacity to think out the circumstances which underlie figurative expressions. In Ephesians 3.14 believers are warned to no longer be children "tossed by the waves and blown about by every shifting wind of teaching". What is the real basis for this kind of figurative language? Are we to imagine a person in a boat blown and tossed about by shifting winds, or should we think of an individual swimming in a lake or pond or possibly the ocean? In a number of languages we cannot leave things open at this point, and it is therefore necessary to choose a satisfactory equivalent. In the present context, this is best reflected by assuming the circumstances of a person in a boat.

As already suggested figurative contradictions are difficult enough to understand in a source language, and they become even more difficult when we try to translate them into another language. In Ephesians 2.21 it is Jesus Christ who "holds the whole building together and makes it grow into a holy temple in the Lord". It is not too difficult in many languages to speak of "holding a building together", though frequently it may be better expressed as a causative, for example, "to cause the building to stay together". But how can we speak of a building growing? Buildings are obviously not living plants. Generally, in such a case we have to drop the figurative meaning of "growing" and simply use a causative expression, "he causes it to become larger".

CONCLUSION

To say that "translators are born, not made" does not mean that a person with real potential for becoming a translator will automatically recognize all the problems and be able to figure out neat solutions on the spot. No, indeed! In fact, many people with tremendous potential for becoming excellent translators may at first turn out poor, wooden texts, simply because they have never realized what a really meaningful translation can and should be. Their experience in school, and the attitude of many church leaders in insisting upon the use of traditional and often meaningless translations, has frequently conditioned people to think that at least for the Bible anything which makes sense is suspect. Perhaps one key to the potential ability of a person to be a translator is his or her deep-seated dissatisfaction with existing translations and a sense of the creative use of words in wanting to explain to people what these wooden and often misleading translations are really trying to say. Ultimately, only persons with unusual capacity for the creative use of words can produce top-flight translations, and one of the greatest responsibilities of the Bible Societies is to seek out, encourage, and train the people who have these necessary gifts for making superb translations.