

ESTABLISHING TRANSLATION PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES

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Next to the selection of the members of a translation team, the most important factor in obtaining a first class translation is the establishment of clearly defined principles and procedures. These are indispensable if team members are to know how everything fits together. Otherwise, a team tackles each new problem as though it were unrelated to the rest of the text. Without well-defined principles and procedures the results of a committee's work will almost certainly be inconsistent, for translation decisions will be made piecemeal and not in the light of fundamental agreements as to what the proposed translation should be like. On the other hand, with a practical and useful set of principles and procedures the members of a team not only know how to go about their work, but when differences of opinion occur, they can argue primarily with the principles and not against each other.

The effectiveness of adequate principles and procedures has been very well demonstrated in the work of the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project, a project set up by the United Bible Societies to examine all the most important textual problems in the Hebrew OT. From the very beginning the committee developed and established a set of guidelines which have been consistently followed throughout the entire program. As a result, the committee was able to make decisions on somewhat more than 5,000 different textual problems during ten sessions of four weeks each. Having first agreed on their fundamental principles and procedures, the members of the committee actually found themselves to be in complete agreement about various problems and issues so often that they began to wonder whether something was wrong. They had the uneasy feeling that there ought to be more disagreement among scholars than they were experiencing! Yet how much better this is than what so frequently happens when there are constant deadlocks, inconsistent compromises, numerous delays, and so many changes in personnel that in many instances the committee which completes the work consists largely of people who were not involved in the program at the beginning. An added disadvantage is that new people sometimes feel under obligation to change drastically the translations that the earlier members of the committee had agreed upon.

The basic principles

But what are the principles for establishing a satisfactory basis for translation, and how can they be set up? Generally, the principles involve some thirty to fifty statements about the proposed translation program, and they attempt to cover the range of possible translation problems. Basically, however, there are five principal areas which must be realistically determined for any translation; and to these may be added a number of supplementary features which must be carefully studied because of the significant differences which are found in the different languages in which translation is taking place.

The principal areas for clearly defined principles of translation involve text, exegetical basis, level of language, formal or dynamic equivalence, and revision or new translation.

Without agreement as to the Greek and Hebrew **text** to be followed, a team of translators will flounder for years. Most translators readily accept the text of the *Greek New Testament*, as published by the Bible Societies, as the basis for translation. For the Old Testament the Masoretic text, as now published in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, is likewise generally accepted. But textual problems are not all resolved so neatly as this might imply, for there are important variants in the texts of both Testaments. As to the New Testament, most translation teams have come to feel that a reading which warrants an A or B decision on the part of the editorial committee should certainly be retained. (The grading of variants, A, B, C, D, is contained in the apparatus of the Greek New Testament text.) But for some of the variants which rate only a C or D, a team may prefer a marginal reading to the one in the body of the text. All such departures from the text should be clearly indicated in footnotes in the translation. As to the Hebrew Old Testament, the judgments of the committee for the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project should be carefully considered, and probably the same judgment as to the evaluation of the A, B, C, D, rating should be followed. Such a principle need not be regarded as a "law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be changed", but general agreement as to a textual basis is certainly indispensable for any effective team work.

A principle with regard to an **exegetical base** is especially important for a translation team which is not composed of experts who are in a position to evaluate carefully the various positions taken by different scholars. In a number of instances certain translations into major languages (usually well-known and widely accepted translations) have been selected as representing the exegetical basis for translation. In other instances certain commentaries have been selected, and in any event scholarly commentaries must be constantly referred to. Translation teams need not follow in every instance the generally accepted principle of exegetical basis, but without some overall agreement as to the exegetical approach to different interpretations a team is in danger of muddling along for years.

Agreement as to the **type or level of language** is essential. Is the proposed translation, for example, to be on a literary or liturgical level? Is it to be present-day or traditional? Is it to be the common language which comes between the literary and the colloquial? Without previous agreement on this issue the translators will often be working at cross-purposes, and in discussion of style the team members will frequently be talking past one another rather than with one another.

It is a mistake to suppose that formal-correspondence (word for word) translations or dynamic-equivalent (meaning for meaning) translations can be produced on only one level of language. Both of these can be produced on various levels. However, it is essential that those responsible for producing a draft of a translation should know exactly what type of translation they are trying to produce. Are they striving, for example, to follow as closely as possible the structure of the original languages in words and grammar? Or are they trying to express the meaning of the text in such a way that those who receive it can fully appreciate how the original text must have been understood by those who first read it or heard it read?

Finally, it is important for team members to agree as to whether a transla-

tion is to be merely a **revision** of an existing text or a completely **new translation**. Normally it is easier to gain acceptance for a new translation than for a revision. When a Bible is being revised, people are often alarmed that someone is "changing the Word of God". In general people are more ready to accept a new translation, possibly because it is not so easy to compare the new translation with what already exists. Furthermore, it is often much easier for a team to produce a new translation than to rework an existing text, especially if it is necessary to change the literary style of the traditional translation to any extent.

Where other principles may be needed

In addition to these five important areas where principles must be clearly stated, there are a number of other factors which must be taken into consideration. For example, the principles ought to cover the manner in which the poetry of the Bible is to be translated. Should the parallelism so characteristic of Hebrew poetry be preserved, or will such parallelism seem like senseless repetition in the new language? Furthermore, what types of passages in the Bible are to be rendered as poetry? It would certainly be a mistake to assume that everything which is printed as poetry in a Hebrew Bible should be reproduced as poetry in another language, because the nature and the function of poetry differ widely in various languages.

What should be done with direct quotations? Should these normally be changed to indirect quotations? Or should indirect quotations be frequently altered to make them direct? A problem which needs special attention is what should be done when there are several layers of direct quotations, one within another.

Another particularly sticky problem involves the use of personal pronouns, especially in those passages in the prophetic writings where it is difficult or impossible to determine whether God or the prophet is speaking.

Parallel passages also present important problems. A conscientious translator will not want to make parallel passages more parallel than they are in the original text; but how much liberty should he take in regard to the inconsistencies which appear between such passages? Surely they should not be represented as more inconsistent than they really are.

Overall sentence length can also be a serious problem, especially in the New Testament, where some Greek sentences run on for a hundred words or more. All languages are capable of having long sentences. But the types of long sentences and their complexity differ widely from language to language. In the Epistles long sentences must frequently be broken up into shorter ones; while in many other cases series of short sentences in Greek or Hebrew may be more effective if they are combined in a way that will conform to the normal written style in the new language. Sentence length, however, is not as important a factor as the complexity of sentences.

The writing system can also cause problems in translation, especially in matters of the transliteration of proper names. And a few principles to guide in punctuation can be extremely helpful for any team trying to work together in the preparation of a consistent text.

What to do about marginal notes is always an issue. To what extent should

alternative renderings of the text be noted in the margin? And what about manuscript variations in the original languages, plays on words, cultural differences, historical background? These are all matters which need to be briefly and accurately mentioned in a margin. All these marginal helps must be provided as the translation moves forward. In fact, the kind of translation given in the text often assumes that there will be explanatory footnotes and depends upon the nature of those notes.

Principles must also cover such supplementary features as introductions, indexes, tables of weights and measures, historical tables, maps, and word lists. Though the supplementary materials may be prepared after the text has been largely determined, nevertheless the nature and number of such supplementary helps must be kept clearly in mind during the process of translating.

Working out the principles

It is one thing to state what kinds of principles should be developed, but quite a different thing to determine how they should be set up. No set of principles should ever be borrowed directly from the experience of one translation team and taken over by another. Nor should such principles be prepared by an advisory committee and simply imposed upon a team of translators. If the principles are to be valid and a team of translators is to follow them, they need to be developed by the team itself. The development of such principles must, of course, be done in close cooperation with the Translations Consultant responsible for giving guidance to the program, and these principles and procedures need to be carefully reviewed by the sponsoring Bible Society or Societies. General preliminary discussions as to what kind of translation is needed must also take place. But the actual working out of the principles can only be done in terms of actual work on selected passages. For example, in an initial session lasting two or three weeks at least, a translation team can give careful consideration to a number of typical passages in the Bible, and on the basis of these work out a definitive statement as to the nature of the proposed translation. The following is a series of passages which have frequently been used in this type of initial consultation: Genesis 1-2, 49, Exodus 20, Ruth, Job 31, Psalms 1, 23, 90, Proverbs 15, Isaiah 53, Song of Songs 1, Ezekiel 1, Matthew 5-7, Luke 1, John 1, Acts 17, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 13, Ephesians 1, and Hebrews 1.

As a team studies these various passages, typical translation problems will inevitably arise. It is then largely the responsibility of the Translations Consultant to help the team work out the principles which apply in each case. Later all the various principles can be arranged systematically to cover various aspects and factors of the translation. It is essential, however, that the members of the translation team themselves work out the principles, since they must feel that the principles they work under represent their own decisions and insights. Only on this basis can the members of the team really commit themselves to the principles. Working out the principles means also that the team members can more easily remember them and their implications. Another particularly important reason why a translation team should work out its own principles is that the team then recognizes the kinds of contexts in which the principles apply.

The importance of having the team work out the principles themselves is well illustrated by what once happened when a Bible Society executive sent to a translation team in Latin America an excellent series of principles to guide them in their work. The document containing these principles was apparently read quickly by the members of the team and then filed away. Three years later not one member of the team could remember what the principles were nor even where the list had been filed!

A satisfactory set of principles developed by a translation team and then followed conscientiously by each member can reduce the total amount of time by at least twenty-five per cent and substantially increase the quality and consistency of its translation by well over fifty per cent.

Working procedures

Important as they are, principles of translation alone are not sufficient. Careful consideration must also be given to procedures. It is important for a translation team to agree upon the order in which various books to be translated are taken up. And this depends largely upon the experience and ability of the various members of the team. For example, it is normally a mistake for any team to begin a fresh translation of the New Testament with the Book of John, for this is really one of the most difficult books in the entire New Testament. Old Testament translation teams are often urged to start with the Psalms, so that the people can have a New Testament and Psalms. But this is often a very serious mistake, since the Psalms present so many difficult translation problems. A translation team needs the experience gained from working with other types of texts before tackling anything as formidable as the Psalms.

Clear procedures must also be determined as to the assignment of various books to be drafted by different members of the team. The assignment obviously depends not only upon the capacity of individual members but also upon their interest. Furthermore, not all the assignments should be made at the beginning, for no team member should be allowed to develop anything like a vested interest in any particular book. All the members should constantly bear in mind that the entire translation project is the responsibility of the team as a whole. Assignments need to be made from time to time, depending upon the quality of work produced by the various team members and the speed with which the program moves forward.

Agreement must also be reached as to the various stages in the translation process including: (1) first draft, (2) review by other members of the team, (3) examination of suggestions by the original drafter, (4) discussion of differences in team sessions, (5) retyping, (6) submission to reviewers and consultants, (7) study of responses from reviewers and consultants by the original drafters, and (8) review by the team. There may be additional stages, depending upon the complexity of the work and the place of reviewers, consultants, and stylists in the project.

Special procedures often need to be set up for the preparation of supplementary material, especially if the translation team is going to take account of suggestions from reviewers and consultants in marginal notes, indexes, and word lists.

The extremely important preparation of the manuscript in its final stage (the form of the translation that will be submitted for publication) can all too easily be neglected. Members of the team may be careless at this point because of weariness after many months of hard work. It is advisable, whenever possible, to have a competent person outside the team read the entire manuscript for consistency, grammatical accuracy, and literary smoothness. Such a person will often discover renderings which have two possible meanings, phrases that sound bad, and other defects which team members have overlooked because they know the text so well.

Conclusions

A list of principles and procedures is, of course, never fixed. Changes can always be introduced, but this should be done only after very careful consideration and for very good reasons. If a change is made in principles and procedures, then each member of the team must know exactly when it starts to apply, and everything which has been done before that time must be carefully reviewed in terms of the revised principles and procedures. All the principles and procedures agreed upon by the committee, both those adopted at the beginning of the project and any modifications or changes adopted later, should be submitted to the related Bible Societies; and there must be agreement between the Societies and the team that such principles and procedures are the ones which will guide the work. If this is done the translation team will have a ready defense against adverse criticism. If the team comes under attack for the way it has rendered any passage, it can appeal to the agreed-upon principles and procedures as a justification for the translation. Furthermore, a clear statement of such principles and procedures can be extremely valuable in helping reviewers and consultants understand the nature of the translation and in assisting them to determine how they can make helpful suggestions.

An adequate set of principles and procedures for translation work has been found to be indispensable. Therefore, those responsible for translation work which is supported by the United Bible Societies have agreed that no translation project will be allowed to go forward until a satisfactory set of these agreed-upon guide-lines has been adopted.

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THE CASE OF THE VANISHING ANGEL

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The early part of the book of Zechariah consists mainly of a series of visions (Zech 1.7-6.15). The first vision in particular contains a number of unusual and interesting problems, and this article discusses some of them from the point of view of the translator.

How many angels?

One prominent feature of Zechariah's vision is the presence of angels in them. In the first vision, it is not at all obvious how many angels are involved, or which one is referred to at any given point. On such a matter, a translator must have a clear picture in his own mind before he can translate effectively, and so it is to this question that we turn first.