

the NR translation team:

1. Whenever possible, use common words which are part of children's own store of language. Having a person on the translation team who is familiar with the oral language of Luo-speaking children will be essential.
2. Whenever possible, avoid regional words such as *siayo*, *ahiti loka kocha* which may be common to South Nyanza but not Central Nyanza. Having a person from each of the geographical areas where Luo is spoken differently—particularly South Nyanza, Central Nyanza (Yuoma, Kano) and Central Nyanza (Upinya, Gem, Uhoho) will be essential.
3. Avoid difficult constructions that will seem awkward to children. Particularly in direct discourse such expressions as *wang'aduru* can be replaced with a more conversational style which will appeal to children. Recording a story as children (or adult new readers) tell it in their own words will be a useful technique for NR translators.
4. Test all NT drafts with the intended target audiences (adults or children). Whenever the essential elements of a passage such as its participants, setting, events or basic teaching are "lost", find a way to restructure the language, or perhaps choose a more suitable passage.

EUGENE A. NIDA

## NEW WORDS FOR OLD MEANINGS

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### Note

*(At the time when the Good News Bible was released, a small book by Dr. Nida entitled Good News for Everyone was also released. This book was intended to be a guide for readers of the new translation explaining the principles and procedures followed by the translators. The following article is actually a chapter from Good News for Everyone, presented here in an edited form. Another extract from the book was published in the April 1980 issue of The Bible Translator.*

—Editor)

"But why change the Bible? We've come to love all those wonderful words". This was the way one person protested the introduction of new words for old meanings in the *Good News Bible*. Such phrases as "gird up the loins of your mind", "tent of meeting", and even "only begotten" are not to be found in the *Good News Bible*, nor do we find such out-of-date phrases as "We do you to wit" (2 Cor 8. 1) or "Thou shalt destroy them that speaking leasing" (Ps 5.6).

The translators of the *Good News Bible* did not, however, introduce changes merely to be different or for the sake of novelty. If a traditional expression is accurate and readily understood by the average reader, it is retained; but where traditional words or phrases may not be clear or may even be misleading, then for the sake of faithfulness to the meaning of the original texts some changes have been introduced.

“Gird up the loins of your mind” (1 Pet 1.13) is undoubtedly a striking Semitic idiom, but in present-day English it is almost totally meaningless. People no longer wear long, flowing garments which must be tightly fastened with a girdle before they can engage in rapid or energetic action. The meaning of this phrase is simply “have your minds ready for action”, and that is precisely how the *Good News Bible* renders it.

The phrase “tent of meeting”, as a way of designating the ancient tabernacle, the center of worship for the Hebrews during their wandering in the wilderness, is for many readers a misleading expression. It suggests a meeting place, where the people normally gathered together or possibly where they met to worship God. In reality, however, the Hebrew phrase indicates that this was a place where the Lord met with his people. This was where the glory of the Lord’s presence was. Accordingly, *the Good News Bible* reads “the tent of the Lord’s presence”.

When some readers do not find the term “only begotten” in John 3.16, they assume that the translators are denying the doctrines of the deity and the virgin birth of Jesus Christ; but this is by no means their intention. The traditional expression “only begotten” arose from a misunderstanding of the original Greek word *monogenēs*. This was carried over into the Latin in the form of the word *unigenitus* (from *uni-* “one” and *-genitus* “born”). But while the Greek *monō* does mean “only”, *-genēs*, the second part of the word, does not come from *gennaō*, “to be born”, but is related to *ginomai*, “to become”. Thus *-genēs* means a “category” or a “kind”, and *monogenēs* really means “only one of its kind”. That is precisely why this same term can be used in speaking of Isaac (Heb 11.17). Isaac was certainly not the only begotten son of Abraham, for Abraham already had a son Ishmael before Isaac was born, and later he had several sons by his wife Keturah. But Isaac, as “the son of the promise”, was the only son of his kind, that is to say, a unique son. Similarly, Jesus Christ is declared in John 3.16 to be the unique son of God, his Son in a way that no one else is or can be. In using “only” in place of “only begotten” the *Good News Bible* not only avoids the use of an old-fashioned term “begotten”, no longer understood by many people, but it emphasizes more effectively the true nature of Christ’s relation to God.

### **Changes in some familiar phrases**

Some phrases are so familiar to regular Bible readers that they do not realize how strange these phrases must seem to people who have not had a lifelong exposure to biblical language. In Genesis 1.1 in place of “heaven and earth” the *Good News Bible* reads “universe”, a phrase which some people think sounds too modern. But in present-day English “heavens” occurs most often in such exclamatory phrases as “heavens, yes!” or “good heavens!”, it has little to do with the ancient concept of the sky. And to the modern speaker of English the

singular form “heaven” conveys a meaning very different from that of the plural “heavens”.

Even more of a problem to many readers is the term “firmament”, which has been used in many translations to refer to the celestial dome on which the stars and planets were supposedly fixed and on which the sun and moon moved in their orbits. This dome also contained the “windows of heaven” through which rain poured down upon the earth, but most importantly it served to separate the water which was above the dome from the water which was on the earth. For most persons today, however, “firmament” has little or no meaning. Some have even thought that it refers to the earth—something that is truly “firm”.

For some people one of the most surprising modifications in the Good News Bible is the change from “sinners” to “outcasts” in such passages as Mark 2.15, 17 and Luke 7.34. Surely, they argue, the Greek term *hamartōloi* should be translated as “sinners” in this passage, since that is what it normally means. But in passages speaking of “tax collectors and sinners”, the reference is not simply to “bad people”, but to those who had abandoned their identification with the Jewish religion and hence had been “cast out” or excommunicated from Jewish society.

In order to make the text of the Scriptures more meaningful and accurate, the *Good News Bible* contains a number of other departures from the wording which some people have long associated with the Bible. When the text speaks of God’s vindication of his people, the word “vengeance” is used instead of “revenge”. “Conscience” sometimes replaces “reins”, which really means “kidneys”. A literal translation of the Hebrew of Psalm 16.7 would in this context be entirely misleading. One would have to say “in the night my kidneys warn me”. The term “leprosy” has a particularly unfortunate connotation in modern language. The term used in the Bible included a number of skin diseases in addition to what is technically known today as “leprosy”. Therefore “dreaded skin disease” is a more accurate and meaningful rendering of the Hebrew term. Some readers of traditional versions have confused Noah’s “ark” with “the ark of the covenant”. Noah’s ark was, of course, a comparatively large boat, and the ark of the covenant was a comparatively small box. Accordingly, that is what the *Good News Bible* calls them, namely, “boat” and “box”. Likewise, the “ark of bulrushes” in which the baby Moses was placed (Ex 2.3) is called “a basket made of reeds”.

### Idioms

Idioms have often been described as “the lifeblood” of a language, and translators are understandably reluctant to lose such effective vehicles of meaning. But when the original meaning of an idiom has been lost, with the result that people consistently misunderstand the figurative language of the original texts, it then becomes obvious, in the interests of accuracy and faithfulness to the meaning of the Scriptures, that such idioms must be sacrificed. In Amos there is a frequently repeated expression “for three transgressions . . . and for four” (Amos 1.3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2.1, 4, 6), because of which the Lord declares that he will punish the various nations surrounding Israel. Many readers of the Bible have regarded the Lord’s actions as entirely inexcusable. If these nations have erred only three or four times, why should they be punished so severely?

In present-day English "three or four times" implies something which is relatively infrequent, for example, "he only did it three or four times." But in ancient Hebrew "for three . . . and for four" meant "over and over again", with the emphasis upon customary and habitual actions. Hence, in these passages in Amos the *Good News Bible* reads: "the people . . . have sinned again and again."

In many instances it is possible to retain a Hebrew or Greek idiom in translation, provided something of its significance is given in the context. In Psalm 60.8 the clause "upon Edom I cast my shoe" might be interpreted by the average reader to mean that God simply despises Edom and is content to use it for nothing more than a box in which to toss dirty shoes or sandals. But in ancient times the casting of a shoe on something was a symbol of ownership, a custom which is reflected in Ruth 4.7, where the handing over of a sandal symbolized the transfer of legal ownership and rights. If the idiom in Psalm 60.8 is to be fully meaningful, it is necessary to supply the understanding which the original readers would have had from the context, "I will throw my sandals on Edom, as a sign that I own it".

Some idiomatic expressions may be well known, but may have lost their original meaning. This is precisely what has happened to the saying "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing". In the Bible this is a warning against pride and show in providing for needy persons, but the saying has now come to mean something very different for many people. They interpret it to mean that, in doing something underhanded or illegal, it is important to keep no records. In this way a person can even have a "lapse of memory" in court. In order to make certain that the real significance of Jesus' message is clear to the reader, the *Good News Bible* has employed the rendering "But when you help a needy person, do it in such a way that even your closest friend will not know about it." In present-day English this would be the equivalent of avoiding all "playing to the grandstands".

Changes in figurative expressions are obviously necessary when they no longer convey their original meanings, but alterations in the descriptions of actual historical events must not be introduced, even though the original significance of the act may have been lost. For example, there are frequent references in the Scriptures to someone's tearing his clothes, either as a sign of grief or of religious outrage. As in Matthew 26.65, the context helps to communicate the significance of the act, even though it may seem more mad than religious to present-day readers, for whom an idiom such as "blew his top" might be more typical.

Many translators of the Scriptures give in to the temptation to "modernize" the events of the Scriptures by substituting present-day parallels. For example, in the case of the Israelite messengers sent by King David to the Ammonites on the occasion of the death of their king, we might want to speak of them as "tarred and feathered" rather than having half their beards shaved off and their skirts cut off at the hips; but being made somewhat beardless as well as "pantless" seems disgrace enough to present-day readers, even though it does not suggest all the humiliation that David's emissaries must have felt.

There are, of course, contexts in which we can quite appropriately use modern equivalents which do full justice to the original texts. In Acts 8.20

Peter's statement "Your silver perish with you" made to Simon the magician, who thought he could buy the power to convey the Holy Spirit to others, sounds pathetically weak. The Greek text employs a strong verb (*apollumi*) in such denunciations, and Peter's statement is far more faithfully and accurately rendered as "May you and your money go to hell!"

### The principle of dynamic equivalence

Some persons have interpreted the principle of "dynamic equivalence" or meaningful translation as meaning any up-to-date expression which carries impact and corresponds at least to some extent with the original text; but such an interpretation of the principle is a badly mistaken one. As mentioned earlier, the whole point of dynamic equivalence is to make it possible for the present-day reader to understand what the original reader must have understood. The content of such a translation must hug the ground of historical realism and fact—the circumstances of time, place, and custom must be thoroughly and accurately biblical—but in its form of language it must read insofar as possible as though originally written in English, rather than in Greek or Hebrew.

The extent to which the principle of dynamic equivalence can and should influence translation may be illustrated by the well-known Psalm 23 as it appears in the *Good News Bible*:

1. The Lord is my shepherd;  
I have everything I need.
2. He lets me rest in fields of green grass  
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.
3. He gives me new strength.  
He guides me in the right paths,  
as he has promised.
4. Even if I go through the deepest darkness,  
I will not be afraid, Lord,  
for you are with me.  
Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.
5. You prepare a banquet for me,  
where all my enemies can see me;  
you welcome me as an honored guest  
and fill my cup to the brim.
6. I know that your goodness and love will be  
with me all my life;  
and your house will be my home as long  
as I live.

For those who have memorized this psalm in childhood, the changes in wording may seem startling, if not somewhat irreverent. But note briefly some of the problems of rendering the meaning of the original text into present-day English. Compare, for example, some of the traditional renderings:

1. "I shall not want" can be understood as "the shepherd whom I shall not want". Furthermore, "to want" now means "to desire", not "to be in need". We could render the second line as "I shall have need of nothing", but the positive statement is not only clearer but more in keeping with the emphasis of the original.

2. "He makes me lie down" could be taken to mean "he forces me to lie down", but the Hebrew form translated "makes" really means "to permit", "to make possible", or "to allow".
3. "He restoreth my soul" sounds as though someone's soul had been lost and was later found. But the Hebrew term so often translated as "soul" (*nephesh*) refers to the entire person, and so "to restore the person" is to "give new strength".
4. "For his name's sake" is a particularly difficult idiom in Hebrew. When rendered literally into English, it either has very little meaning or suggests a wrong meaning, namely, that the Lord does these things merely for his own selfish glory or reputation. Since in Hebrew the term "his name" is so frequently used as a symbol for the Lord himself, as savior, protector, and creator, who has bound himself to his people by a covenant, it seems more in keeping with the true sense of the phrase to speak of the Lord's actions as reflecting his promises.
5. "The valley of the shadow of death" has long been associated with the experience of death, but the Hebrew word rendered "shadow of death" generally refers to intense darkness, and so it may be more appropriately and accurately rendered as "deepest darkness".
6. "Comfort me" seems rather out of keeping in the context of "rod and staff", used by shepherds not to comfort sheep but to protect and defend them.
7. "Anoint my head with oil" seems entirely strange to the present-day reader, for "oil" would only be understood as some kind of lubricant for engines and motors. Even "pouring olive oil on the head" would seem inappropriate—scarcely the way to honor a guest at a banquet. Therefore the *Good News Bible* has shifted the figurative language to read "you welcome me as an honored guest", something which on one occasion a man who invited Jesus to his house failed to do (Luke 7.46).

### The translation of "man"

One of the most extensive as well as subtle changes in the *Good News Bible* reflects the concerns of the women's liberation movement. Some women are becoming increasingly disturbed by the frequent use of "man" or "men" in traditional translations when in reality the reference is to people of both sexes. For example, in the book of Proverbs in the King James Version the word "man" or "men" occurs some 119 times, but only 5 of these are specific references to an adult male. In many instances it has been possible for the translators of the *Good News Bible* to use "persons", "people", "someone", "anyone", or "mankind" rather than "man" or "men"; but in a number of contexts, especially those involving the relation, as well as the contrast, between God and "man", there is simply no way of avoiding the use of this term. One particularly useful means of avoiding the problem when the reference is to people in general is the shift from singular to plural. The first part of Psalm 1, for example, reads "Happy are those who . . ." rather than "Happy is the man who . . ."

These concerns of "women's lib" may in fact be in the direction in which some people believe the English language is moving, but obviously the translators could never have accepted some of the extreme suggestions made by

certain militants, who even wanted the pronoun "it" to be used in place of "he" when referring to God. Others have recommended "they" in referring to God, as a constant reference to the Trinity. Some have objected to the term "mankind" since it contains the component "man-"; and a few even reject the term "human", since they see the masculine "-man" hidden in this form.

The changes which the translators have introduced are not, however, attempts to placate an extreme minority; rather they reflect an effort to make the text as universally applicable as possible. When the linguistic forms are singular and particular, but the meaning is actually plural and general, then some modification is not only justified but even desirable.

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## SOME HINTS ON SOLVING TEXTUAL PROBLEMS

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Bible translation is difficult in all of its stages. There is the difficulty of determining the meaning of a passage of Scripture, and there is the difficulty of selecting a proper form for the expression of this meaning in the receptor language. Then there is the difficulty of stating the meaning in a way that is both accurate and clear. But there is yet another difficulty which must be dealt with before any of these others. It is that of deciding upon what words are best considered to be a genuine part of the original text.

Biblical scholars have developed a scientific method of study and research that deals with this difficulty of deciding on what words belong in the text. It is known as "textual criticism". As used by scholars the word "criticism" does not have the negative meaning of saying what is wrong with the text. Rather it is used positively in the sense of weighing up all available evidence to determine as nearly as possible the original words of the biblical text. Over the years "textual criticism" has developed into a highly technical science which requires specialized skills. Yet there are ways by which the translator who does not have these skills may benefit from the work of textual experts. This may be done in the same way that a person who knows nothing about the science of flying may board a plane and fly to distant places.

In what follows we shall look at examples of textual problems from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The article will then conclude with some practical guidelines to help translators who are unskilled in the science of textual criticism. But consideration must first be given to two important facts.

### **Two Important Facts**

As we examine various textual problems, there are two important facts that must be kept in mind: (1) For the most part textual differences do not affect basic biblical teachings. What the Bible teaches about sin and salvation, for