

THE IDEOPHONE IN BIBLE TRANSLATION: CHILD OR STEPCHILD

Dr Philip Noss is a UBS Translation Consultant based in Cameroon

Translation is a process that takes place between two languages, a Source Language and a Receptor Language. A Message that was expressed by someone in a first language is transferred into a second language by a person known as a Translator. In both the original text and in its translated form, the Message is intended as communication to an Audience. In the first formulation of the Message, the author made linguistic choices based on a number of factors such as the nature of the Message, the identity of his intended Audience, the structure of his own language, that is the Source Language, and his capacity to use it. It can be assumed, I believe, that his choices were made on the basis of the complete language in a process of selection in which the guiding principle would have been the effectiveness of communication in relation to the response that he anticipated from his audience.

The Translator likewise formulates, or encodes, and in the process he makes choices. Ideally, his command of the Receptor Language should be equal to the original author's command of the Source Language. In the same way that the author drew on all aspects of his own language, the translator must draw on the full scope and depth of the language into which he is translating. However, unlike the first author who worked with one language, the translator is subject to the requirements and constraints of two languages, those of both the Source and Receptor Language. He must take into account the various principles that are operative in the Receptor Language as well as those principles that guided or constrained the original author.

The Ideophone

The ideophone is a very prominent vocabulary item in many languages. In a recently published Gbaya-French dictionary containing 8544 entries, 2097 are ideophones, and instead of making an effort to record ideophones, the compilers did the opposite in restricting their number. In the African context, the ideophone was described by Clement Doke in 1935 as a "vivid representation of an idea in sound" (page 118). More recently it has been defined as a "phonologically peculiar set of descriptive or qualificative words".

The ideophone is an important aesthetic element in many literary traditions. It is a very common feature of song where it can be used for rhythmic effect. In oral tales it also plays an important descriptive role.

If the translator is to consider the full range of a language in his work, and if ideophones are an important part of language and of literary form, what is to be their role in translation? The tendency in the past has been to avoid them. They do not appear to have been considered to be legitimate words, at least not for serious literature. In a committee meeting discussing

language and translation problems in Biakpan, a language of southeastern Nigeria, the translator found himself under attack by the reviewers, who were fellow native speakers of the language, for using an ideophone which they labeled a "native word", making it clear that they considered it inappropriate for a scripture text.

The reason for the translator's tendency to shy away from the use of ideophones may perhaps be found in his models. Whether it is an expatriate translator whose familiarity with this class of words is primarily from comic books or from songs like "Old MacDonald Had a Farm", which are not usually taken to be appropriate models for scripture translation, or the native speaker whose models may be secondary school or university literature texts, or perhaps the Good News Bible, the model does not seem to encourage the use of ideophones. The ideophone is frequently relegated to oral speech which is considered to be informal discourse and this is not usually regarded as an acceptable model for translation.

However, there may be another reason for the native speaker's reluctance to employ ideophones in scripture translation. The reason may lie in the nature of the ideophone itself. From his own literary tradition, he recognizes its extreme richness and power which work against its casual use. Being all too aware of its potential and of the dangers of misusing it, he may follow the apparently safer approach of ignoring it. It is easier to exclude it from his translation than to try to use it, when its inherent nature is to break out of rules in a drama of its own. Even linguists neglect and "wholly omit" ideophones from their grammatical descriptions. It is simpler to set the ideophone outside the scope of a grammar than to attempt to explain the rules by which it operates.

But the ideophone is obviously an important part of language: it features prominently in daily discourse, it is a powerful literary device. Can it then be legitimately ignored by the translator of Scripture whose concern is the effective communication of the Good News?

The ideophone in Gbaya literature

The ideophone is an inherent part of the Gbaya language and of the vocabulary of every member of the Gbaya speech community. But it is a very unique kind of word. For example, it employs consonants that do not occur in other Gbaya words and it uses consonants in combinations that are not possible in other words. It is frequently characterized by sound patterns and effects such as assonance, consonance, alliteration, sibilance, vowel and consonant alternation, as well as doubling, tripling, partial tripling, repetition, and lengthening.

It is also unique grammatically because it may function as an adjective or as an adverb, and the same ideophone may be an adjective in one context and an adverb in another. The uniqueness of the ideophone further extends to its role in sentence structure. It may stand as a modifier to an entire clause or it may replace the verb.

However, the most obvious uniqueness of the ideophone lies in its meaning. In Gbaya ideophones, the Gbaya perception of sensation is

expressed in sound. Sensation as it is perceived, whether sound, feeling, smell, touch, sight, or even emotion, is expressed according to the Gbaya system of sound.

In the following examples the ideophone stands as a modifier, adjectival in the first, adverbial in the other two (the ideophone is marked by being in heavy type):

1. *zer-foro o gowang*
ear-elephant = *gowang*
“an elephant’s ears are pendulous”
2. *a yee ko rut*
it entered hole *rut* .
“it (cane rat) entered a hole like a flash”
3. *wa gbara kindong yak*
they filed *kindong* depart
“they filed away one after the other”

In the following examples, although the ideophone may appear to be a simple modifier, it is in fact the representative of a second underlying clause:

4. *ene zok yi sarkaka*
you (pl) look eyes *sarkaka*
you look eyes + eyes are uncoordinated
“look at his uncoordinated eyes”
5. *yi baa a hivbik*
water took him *hivbik*
water took him + he went completely under suddenly
“suddenly he went under (the water)”

The ideophone may also take the place of a verb or even replace a complete sentence:

6. *bem ko koro faooo*
child of rain *faooo*
“the child of Rain glided off”
7. *Wanto danga, hafafa hufuk*
Wanto climbed, *hafafa hufuk*
“Wanto climbed, (and) with arms flailing he fell backwards to the ground”

In the last example above, the narrator is telling a tale of the Gbaya trickster Wanto who tries unsuccessfully to reach the meat that has been hung up in a tree by his rival Tortoise. The ideophones depict his flailing motion as he falls and the unceremonious manner in which he lands on the ground. The first one, *hafafa*, is normally used to describe a swallow’s skimming flight over the surface of water as it catches insects; the second, *hufuk*, is the action of tossing one’s opponent to the ground in a wrestling match. There are thus two sentences, the second of which is composed of two ideophones.

This latter sentence also gives an example of the use of ideophones as metaphor. Wanto's frantic flailing motions are described in the image of the swift flight of a swallow. When used by a creative artist, the ideophone may therefore be a very dramatic literary device.

The ideophone in Gbaya translation

The Gbaya ideophone occurs in the speech of all Gbaya and in all contexts and situations where Gbaya is spoken. The Gbaya translations team, recognizing the importance of oral form, as well as the importance of the ideophone in literary usage, concluded that the ideophone could not be ignored but should be used as much as was reasonable and appropriate in view of the constraints of both the Message and the Source Language. The Gbaya team therefore used ideophones in a number of different ways in the recently published New Testament (1982) and in the earlier published Psalms (1974).

Ideophones commonly occur as derivatives—words that are used in everyday speech and which are clearly related to ideophones.

- 8a) id. *kput-kput* the bubbling of a spring of water
 8b) n. *kpu-kput* Ps 114.8 "flowing springs"
 9a) id. *mgbimgbimbi* the sound of rolling thunder
 9b) v. *mgbimbi* "to roar, to bellow, to low"
 Ps 77.19 "The crash of your thunder rolled out."
 10a) id. *kpinggim* the sound of a heavy crash
 10b) adj. *kpinggii-te* "heavy post/log"
 Lk 6.41 "log"

Ideophones were sometimes used for precision in descriptions. They were used to modify nouns or to qualify verbs where other words would not have been as precise or where a paraphrase would otherwise have been required.

11. Mk 9.34 *bee wa ya selele*
 but they were *selele* (i.e. silent)
 "But they would not answer him, ..."
 12. Mt 16.2 *yi-zan ne gbee bereng'e*
 face-sky which redded *bereng* here
 "... because the sky is red."
 13. Rev 16.12 *yi osa tai-tai*
 water/river receded *tai-tai*
 "*The river dried up, ...*"

In the last two examples above, the ideophones lend precision to the verbs which in both cases have a wide range of meaning. The verb "to be red, to become red, to redden" encompasses the spectrum of color from yellow to orange to red that is characterized by brightness. If the verb is used alone, it is very general in meaning and it is therefore qualified by *bereng* which describes the reddish-orange color of the evening sky. In the last sentence, the verb *osi* means "to ebb, to recede, to subside, to go down," and it is the correct word in the context here. However, it is not

sufficiently precise to convey the meaning of the original text. The ideophone *tai-tai* makes explicit the fact that the river dried up “bone dry” and could be used as a passageway.

Ideophones were sometimes used for dramatic effect. In this usage it might be said that the ideophone is optional, not in terms of Gbaya style, but with regard to the original text. It is often used in this manner to add precision that the translators feel is implicit in the text.

14. Ps 18.7-8

Nu foo mo *dirr*, bee o nang-kaya zudi *but*. Ne nyimsea ko-a a dee ha mo me fo mo. Zi-wee tura ne ko zoo-aa gbone *ndudee*, wee baa ko nu-a mbet, bee o kei-wee nyong *yonggonggo*.

earth moved *dirr* and the feet-hills broke loose *but* was anger of him that caused for things to move smoke-fire rose from inside his nose *ndudee* fire blazed in mouth him also and coal-fire ate *yonggonggo*

Then the earth quivered and quaked, the foundations of the mountains trembled (they quivered because he was angry); from his nostrils a smoke ascended and from his mouth a fire consumed (live embers were kindled at it).

The Psalmist’s imagery vividly portrays the awesome power of God. In the English translation quoted here (JB), the power of the imagery is conveyed by the verbs, but in Gbaya it is conveyed by ideophones that modify the verbs. The Gbaya verb states that the earth moved and the ideophone described how it moved—*dirr*, in the way that the earth trembles when there is an earthquake. In the second line the mountains are shaken, and the Gbaya verb is that commonly used with uprooting a plant like a mushroom whose root goes very deep into the earth. The verb and the ideophone *but* create an image that dramatically depicts the mountains’ being shaken to their very foundations. The image of smoke also calls for an ideophone because the verb normally used for the movement of smoke merely describes the motion of smoke drifting or floating in its usual lazy manner. GNB here says that it “poured” from his nostrils, and Gbaya uses the ideophone *ndudee* to depict mass movement, that of smoke pouring out of his nostrils. The final line includes an ideophone that makes explicit the burning heat of the coals in his mouth. Without it, the coals might be dying embers, but with *yonggonggo*, it is clear that they are burning devouring coals. Two lines of the translation are without ideophones, that of the prosaic explanation that it is God’s anger that is the cause of the events being described by the Psalmist, and the next to last line in which the consuming flame is described. In the latter clause, an ideophone is not needed because the verb itself is powerful and precise in this context. An

ideophone would have been redundant and would have drawn needless attention to itself.

Jesus' parable of two house builders is recounted by both Matthew and Luke. The story is short and dramatic, building up from the wisdom of the first man to the foolishness of the second. In addition to using literary and dramatic narrative style to recount the plot line, the Gbaya translators used ideophones to depict the final drama of both versions of the account.

15. Mt 7.27

bee tua'i gbin a nu gete-gete

"...and it fell. And what a terrible fall that was!"

16. Lk 6.49

bee tua'i gbin a nu ne oi-aa leng mutu-mutu

"... and it fell at once—and what a terrible crash that was!"

In both accounts GNB uses the verb "fall". Gbaya also has a verb "to fall", but it cannot be used here because the houses did not fall from anywhere. They were on the ground and they broke apart or collapsed (see JB). This is expressed in Gbaya by a serial verb construction "break-put ground". To express Luke's stronger form of the Greek verb, the Gbaya team added "completely".

Following the Greek text, both English versions add a final emphatic clause which Gbaya expresses by an ideophone. To translate Matthew's version, the Gbaya team said *gete-gete* which depicts the action of breaking apart, of scattering in small pieces. To emphasize Luke's portrayal of collapse and total ruin, the Gbaya team said *mutu-mutu* which describes total destruction, something being crushed and ground to pieces. The Gbaya use of the ideophone is more economical and direct than the Greek original and the English translation which both require an additional term and, in the latter, even an exclamation mark.

In a very few instances the Gbaya team used ideophones in what could be considered purely literary usage, either in special sentence constructions or in metaphors.

17. Mk 14.6

ene e a gedek

you (pl) leave her *gedek*

"Leave her alone."

In this example, two clauses may be understood. Jesus rebukes those who complain about the woman's wasteful use of perfume, telling them to leave her alone so that she may be *gedek* "quiet, undisturbed, untroubled".

When used metaphorically, an ideophone normally associated with a concrete meaning is used in abstraction or with an extended meaning.

18. Ps 143.4

see-am gona lasak

liver-me cut/stopped *lasak*

"My spirit fails me."

19. Ps 68.10

wo dukaa ko tua k'ene gbe'm gbee lek-lek

hunger being inside house of you kills/devours/
consumes me *lek-lek*

"My devotion to your Temple burns in me like a fire."

20. Lk 17.6 *k'ene bo so ne ee-ta ne So koo benang kee*
 if you had faith in God even little *kee*
 "If you had faith as big as a mustard seed..."
21. Rev 3.16 *bee hee mo ne me duk wolee, bo ne gee-aa in wee-aa*
na mbet ga
 but as you are *wolee* not hot or cold either
 "But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold..."

Each of the ideophones used in the above examples is applied metaphorically to something other than what it usually refers to. *Lasak* is normally associated with the forceful dumping of a liquid onto the ground, but in this context it depicts an abrupt loss of courage. *Lek-lek* usually describes the consuming action of flames as they burn and devour, but here it is applied to the burning of desire or zeal. *Kee* denotes a very tiny and barely visible object. In the text quoted, the Gbaya team applied it to faith instead of referring to a mustard seed which is unknown to Gbaya readers. In the final quotation, the translators retain the writer's image of a lukewarm liquid as a metaphor for weakness of character by using the ideophone *wolee*. The image is expanded, however, because the Gbaya ideophone is generally applied to a neutral and therefore unacceptable sensation, whether that of a tepid liquid or of tasteless fruit. In two of the above examples, the Gbaya team used ideophones to reproduce images found in the original text, in the other two the team attempted to convey the meaning of the original by introducing Gbaya imagery through the use of ideophones.

Conclusion

The Gbaya team was familiar with ideophones from its own literary heritage. All the team members had grown up listening to and telling traditional tales. One of the translators was a gifted poet and dramatist. They recognized the importance of the ideophone in Gbaya narrative and poetry. They knew that the stories and parables of the Gospel writers, the account of John's vision, and the poems of the Psalmist would not be acceptable to a Gbaya audience if one of the most creative devices in Gbaya literary tradition was excluded. They therefore concluded that the ideophone should be used in their work. It was a child that belonged in the family, not a stepchild to be ignored and abused.

However, the team quickly discovered that in translation the ideophone could be a very unruly child. It was a temperamental child whose genius all too easily led it to play pranks on the unwary translator. If not used with great care, the lively child conveyed the Message in a dramatically heightened style that detracted from the Message by drawing attention to itself. But when used carefully, it became an important feature in the transfer of the Message from the Source Language to the Receptor Language in a style that was appropriate to the Message and pleasing to the audience.

When used with caution, following the constraints both of the Message

in its Source Language and of the aesthetic form of the Receptor Language, the ideophone is an important literary device that should not be ignored by the translator of Scripture.

Editorial Note

In this article Gbaya words and text have been transcribed from the proper Gbaya orthography to a very much simplified orthography which uses only the standard English characters. This has been done purely to make printing and reading of the article easier.

HOWARD A. HATTON

TRANSLATING SCRIPTURE IN THE COMIC MEDIUM

Dr Howard A. Hatton is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Micronesia

Recently the UBS Asia Pacific Regional Center in Hong Kong has started to publish a series of Old Testament comics in English. These full color, superbly illustrated books focus on the lives of a number of Old Testament characters such as Moses, David, Elijah and so on. Five of these books are already in circulation, with another one presently being printed in Hong Kong.

A number of national Bible Societies plan to translate these comics into certain languages in their areas. So it is quite possible that some translators in Asia who receive *The Bible Translator* may be called upon to translate these comics into their own languages. But before a successful translation of scripture into the comic medium can be done, the translator needs to be aware of the unique elements of this fascinating medium and the translation problems which he or she will face. It is not enough to merely transfer a common language biblical text over into the format of a comic book. Certain adjustments and transformations must be made to the text to make it compatible with this exciting and popular medium.

Elements of the Comic Medium

The comic medium employs an intricate interplay between several elements: captions, communication in balloons (conversation, thoughts, exclamations, and so on), kinesic communication (facial expressions, hand gestures, blushes, shoulder shrugs, and so on), sound effects, and pictures. These elements must be in a good balance if the comic is to be successful. Illustration 1 which is two frames from the David 1 comic from the Asia Pacific series shows some of these elements.

General principles for adaptation of biblical texts to the comic medium

The comics committee in the UBS Asia Pacific Region realized that careful principles would need to be developed to aid the adaptation of