

THOSE PROBLEM PRONOUNS: *WE*, *US* AND *OUR* IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When reading Scripture, how often do we stop to ask what a writer means when he speaks of *we*, *us* or *our*? Take for example the passage in Mark 9: 38 where John says to the Lord, 'Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us'. Perhaps one person who reads these words in English will automatically think of 'us' as referring to the Lord *and* His disciples; but perhaps another will automatically think of it as referring to the disciples only. Probably neither reader would make the decision consciously, with the alternate possibility in mind.

Or consider the words of certain elders of the Jews, speaking to Jesus on behalf of a centurion whose slave was ill: 'He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue' (Luke 7: 4 f.). Does it ever occur to us that the two 'our' words in this quotation are different?

To many a Bible translator, working at the task of making the Scriptures speak a language of Asia, or the Islands of the Pacific, or Africa, or Latin America, such questions are very real ones, questions which have to be answered at every turn. For he finds himself faced with two different kinds of first person plural pronouns—one which includes the person spoken to (labelled by linguists 'inclusive') and one which excludes the person spoken to (labelled by linguists 'exclusive'). In the first illustration given above (Mark 9: 38), it might well be either inclusive or exclusive, but probably the better choice would be inclusive, i.e. 'we forbade him because he was not following you and us'. In the second illustration (Luke 7: 4 f.) the first 'our' is inclusive, referring to the Jewish nation of which both the speakers and Jesus were a part. But the second 'our' is no doubt exclusive, i.e. the synagogue in their town, of which Jesus was not a part.

At first glance the decisions may not seem to be very difficult to make. Actually, however, the problems become very complex, involving interpretation of events in terms of the cultural context, details of the situation being described, the speaker's attitude toward his audience, and exactly what group he has in mind. These various points may be divided into five analytical questions: (1) What facts in the cultural context are relevant? (2) Whom is the speaker or writer addressing? (3) Whom does the speaker or writer have in mind? (4) What is his feeling about his audience? (5) Where does a given quotation end? Let us take up each of these questions in some detail, with illustrations.

Analytical Questions

(1) *What facts in the cultural context are relevant?*

In John 4:12 the Samaritan woman says to the Stranger at the well, 'Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well?' In order to

decide which kind of pronoun to use here, one must consider the cultural relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews. Did she consider that Jacob was also His father and that He belonged to the group to whom the well was given? It may be that she was consciously playing the Samaritans against the Jews and therefore would have used an exclusive first person pronoun, had there been one in her language.

In Luke 24: 20, the disciples on the road to Emmaus are taken by surprise by one who evidently had not heard about the things which had happened 'Concerning Jesus of Nazareth . . . and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned . . .' In order to translate 'our' one must consider just whom did they consider this Stranger to be—Jew or Gentile? The answer comes in a cultural setting—undoubtedly they considered Him to be a Jew or they would not have invited Him to eat with them (vv. 29–30). And so it is translated with an inclusive pronoun.

(2) *Whom is the speaker or writer addressing?*

In the translation of each epistle, for example, the translator must consider whether it is being written to Jewish or to Gentile Christians, for there are many references (such as 'our fathers') which involve such decisions. Since, however, a number of the epistles seem to include both Jews and Gentiles at some points, we are frequently faced with the problem of a divided audience and other problems to be discussed under questions (3) and (4).

(3) *Whom does the speaker or writer have in mind in his pronominal reference?*

This question is the one which arises most frequently in the inclusive/exclusive analysis, hence examples are numerous.

In Matt. 14: 17 and 15: 33, Mark 6: 37 and Luke 9: 13, as the disciples discuss the lack of bread and ask 'Where are we to get enough bread?' are they including Jesus in their thinking or not? Opinions differ on the answer to this problem, due to the difficulty of determining just what the disciples had in mind.

In John 12: 38 and Rom. 10: 16, 'Lord, who has believed our report?' (quotation from Isa. 53: 1), does Isaiah mean the message of God and himself (hence inclusive) or the message he and others were giving out? The Hebrew form 'what we heard', together with the Greek form 'what is heard of us', gives the clue that it should be exclusive, the message he and others were giving out.

The average English reader may tend to include himself in the thought of 1 Cor. 9: 10, 'for our sake', but it is probably intended to refer to Paul and other preachers, and hence exclusive. Similarly, Gal. 5: 5 taken out of its context might be the basis of a sermon in which speaker and audience were included in the 'we wait for the hope . . .', but the context of v. 4 indicates a contrast between Paul's message and that of the Judaizers, and thus an exclusive we.

The problem of a divided audience also leads to the question as to what the speaker had in mind as he spoke. In Acts 1: 21 Peter is introducing to a group of 120 believers the need of replacing Judas, and he says, 'one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us'. Is he referring to the whole audience or only to

the apostles? The Greek verb indicates 'to company with' and seems to refer to the apostles who accompanied Him constantly for three years. Then, since the apostles were in the group in the upper room, a choice must be made as to whether Peter would concentrate on the others of the group and refer to the apostles with an exclusive pronoun, or concentrate on the apostles and use an inclusive. It is likely the more common use would be the exclusive, since the apostles were in the minority, but the translator would have to watch for the way the language into which he is translating handles such matters.

(4) *What is the speaker's feeling about his audience?*

In Acts 7: 39 f. as Stephen is reciting the story of the exodus from Egypt and the failures of the Israelites, he says, 'in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, "Make for us gods to go before us; as for this Moses . . . we do not know what has become of him"'. What was their feeling about Aaron? Did they think that he too would want a god made for him, to go 'before us-inclusive'? Probably. And did they think that Aaron *did* know what had happened to Moses? Or would they include him in their statement of doubt and ignorance? Perhaps one guess is as good as another at this point.

In Acts 15: 11, 'But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus', did Peter feel that his audience was in agreement with him on this point? Or was he making a statement in contradiction to their opinion? Probably the former, and so inclusive.

In the epistles one must consider, as a part of this major question, the writer's personal feeling and desires for his audience. In a number of instances Paul seems to address his audience as though he were anticipating in them something of the spiritual experience which he describes as being true of himself and other apostles. Thus, although strictly speaking many of these passages should be exclusive, they are frequently translated as inclusive because of the fact that the inclusive pronoun is generalized in this way in many languages (see (b) below).

(5) *Where does a given quotation in a letter end?*

For example, in Gal. 2: 14 Paul quotes himself as speaking to Peter. If the quotation continues into v. 15, then the 'We ourselves, who are Jews by birth' would be translated as inclusive. More likely, however, the quotation ends with v. 14, the focus of attention then shifting to the Galatians, and so it would be exclusive *we*.

'Receptor Language' Problems

In addition to the exegetical questions discussed above, there are two other types of problems to be considered: the textual problem of confusion in manuscript tradition between *hēmeis*, 'we', and *humeis*, 'you' (pl.), and specific problems which arise in any given language, resulting from factors peculiar to that particular language.

Problems in the 'receptor' language (the one receiving the new translation) are of two types: (a) formal and (b) semantic.

(a) *Formal problems.* Various kinds of expressions found in the Greek

text and easily translated into other Indo-European languages cannot be translated into some languages without added material, which may involve a first person plural pronoun. These then add to the list of decisions which have to be made in the light of the exegetical questions given above. In one language, Highland Mazatec of Mexico, nearly a hundred first person plural references have been added in the four Gospels.

Some of the formal problems requiring such additions are the following:

(1) Abstract nouns must often be shifted to verbs or phrases including verbs, such as 'what we believe' for 'our faith'. In Mazatec, for example, such nouns as 'justice' and 'self control' (Acts 24: 25) were changed to a verbal form with inclusive first person pronoun. 'Inheritance' in Luke 12: 13 was changed to 'the gift which we shall receive' (exclusive).

(2) Indirect discourse must be changed to direct, so 'He said that they . . .' becomes 'He said, "We . . ."'.

(3) Certain forms must be possessed by someone, and thus may require a first person plural pronoun. This is frequently true of members of the family and becomes especially pertinent in such New Testament expressions as 'the Father' (John 1: 14; 3: 35, etc.), and 'brother' (1 Cor. 1: 1, etc.). Parts of the body are also frequently in this required-possession class. In Mark 12: 33 in Mazatec the words 'heart', 'understanding', and 'strength' all had to be expressed with a possessive pronoun (first person plural inclusive was chosen).

(4) Greek participles and infinitives must frequently be changed to finite verbs involving first person plural pronouns. Some of these have already been shifted to finite verbs in some English translations; others have not. In Mark 3: 4 the four verb forms 'to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill' all had to be changed to finite form in Mazatec. First person plural inclusive pronominal forms were chosen. In Col. 1: 3 f., two Greek participles, 'praying' and 'having heard', must be changed to finite verbs in many languages, and thus must include first person plural pronouns.

(b) *Semantic problems.* Semantic problems are involved in such situations as Paul's use of the 'editorial we'. If the receptor language does not use this kind of reference, these must be changed to the singular form. If it is acceptable in the language, then of course the form would be the exclusive one.

More complex semantic problems are involved in the particular use which a given language makes of the exclusive and inclusive forms.

Some languages extend the use of the inclusive to a type of generic or 'neutral' territory. This form would then be used more generally than in other languages and would include especially those portions where writers of epistles seem to be anticipating potential spiritual experience in the recipients of the letter, as in 1 Cor. 2: 13, 'And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom', or 1 John 5: 14, 'And this is the confidence which we have in him . . .'

The translator must be on the alert for various other kinds of semantic problems in his receptor language. He must be very careful to discover the implications of each usage. For example, would the use of 'our-exclusive God' in 1 Thess. 3: 9 (the choice if one considers he is speaking of his God

in contrast to the Thessalonians' former gods) imply that He is *not* their God, even now? Such would be the case in the Huixteco language of Mexico. The translator of the Huixteco New Testament discovered that every use of an exclusive pronoun had to be considered in the light of special implications, for the exclusive always implied the reverse meaning for the audience. In Matt. 5: 16, for example, the words 'give glory to *your Father* who is in heaven' had to be changed to ' . . . our (inclusive) Father . . .' Otherwise, to the Huixtecos it gave the impression that the father Jesus spoke of was *not His* father, but only theirs.¹

Another implication problem in the Huixteco is illustrated by Acts 6: 3, 'pick out . . . men . . . whom we may appoint . . .' Even though it is actually the leaders who do the appointing, the use of the exclusive seemed to imply a superior attitude on the part of the speaker, and hence the translation helpers preferred to use the inclusive.²

As a basic guide to translators, a more thorough presentation of the problems is being prepared, including every reference to first person plural in English translations. It is hoped that such a basic study may save both translators and translation consultants a great deal of time, and provide a more consistent base on which to build—adjustable, of course, to the demands of the particular receptor language.

¹ *But note that in the New Testament Jesus never speaks of 'Our Father' in this inclusive sense. It is always 'My Father and your Father'. There are theological issues here of great importance. Ed.*

² *The translation helpers were probably right even if their reasons are doubtful! For the context states that the appointments were made 'by the whole body'. Ed.*