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IDENTIFYING PARTICIPANTS IN OLD TESTAMENT DIALOGUE

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One of the problems that Bible translators meet in the prophetic books of the Bible is the identification of the participants. There are many places where we cannot be sure about who is speaking and who a particular message is being addressed to. The confusion results from the presence of so many pronouns without the people they refer to being given.

This problem is not present to the same extent in the narrative or story sections of the OT. However, there are instances where the translator needs to supply a name or some other noun to identify a participant who is represented by only a pronoun in the Hebrew text, or where there is only a verb without a separate subject. One important element of OT narrative that needs attention in this respect is conversation or dialogue.

The quotative formula

Dialogue plays an important part in the way stories are told in the OT. And the ancient Hebrew writers had certain rules for arranging units of dialogue when shaping a story. The most important rule is that every transition or change from narration to dialogue is marked by a form of words that we may call a quotative formula.

No story in the OT begins with the actual words of conversation between the story's characters. Every story contains a narration of events and circumstances which provides the background necessary for the reader to understand what the conversation is about. The narration also identifies the story's characters by name or some other form of words. Hebrew story-writers clearly marked the place where the narration ended and the dialogue began. They used the quotative formula to do this.

For instance, in the story of Ruth at Ruth 1.8 the transition from narration to the beginning of dialogue is marked by the quotative formula, "Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law". Here the quotative formula does two things: (1) It marks the end of the narration and the beginning of the dialogue. (2) It identifies the participants and distinguishes the speaker from the person being spoken to.

The use of the quotative formula to mark the change from narration to dialogue was a rule that the Hebrew story-teller always followed. In Hebrew story-telling, dialogue did not run on directly from narration without some

form of words to mark the transition. But translators using an English version as a model will find that English translators are not bound by the same rule. So GNB can render Ruth 3.8-9 as:

During the night he woke up suddenly, turned over, and was surprised to find a woman lying at his feet. 'Who are you?' he asked.

The reader has no difficulty in recognizing where the narration ends and the dialogue begins, although the speaker's words run on from the narration.

English usage allows the use of non-verbal symbols like quotation marks as adequate signals for marking the beginning of dialogue. But of course Hebrew writers did not use quotation marks. They introduced dialogue with verbal signals. There will be many other languages which are the same as the Hebrew in this respect. They would always require a quotative formula to make the point of transition from narration to dialogue. Translators in these languages who are using an English model as an aid, will of course use the signals which their own languages require and will not reproduce the English form where it is different from this.

Another rule that some other languages share with Hebrew is that the position of the quotative formula throughout a unit of dialogue is fixed. In Hebrew the formula is always placed before the words of the speaker. This position is never changed. The writer of the book of Ruth is following the rules of Hebrew discourse when he places the formula *wayyō'mer*, "he said", before the words that Boaz spoke to Ruth (3.9). Those other languages that share this feature with Hebrew may of course differ in the actual position that the quotative formula takes. In Sinhala, the language spoken in Sri Lanka, the position of the quotative formula is fixed, but it is divided into two parts. Part of the formula comes before the speaker's words and the second part of the formula marks off the end of the speech. English structure allows greater flexibility in positioning the formula. Here is an example from three different English translations of Ruth 2.13:

"Ruth answered, 'You are very kind to me, sir' " (GNB)

" 'Indeed, sir,' she said, 'you have eased my mind and spoken kindly to me, . . . ' " (NEB)

" 'May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord,' she said" (NIV)

The three English versions have placed the quotative formula ("she said" and "Ruth answered") in three different positions, GNB at the beginning of the sentence, NEB in the middle of the sentence and NIV at the end of the sentence.

The second function of the Hebrew quotative formula, of identifying and distinguishing the speaker and the person spoken to, at the beginning of a unit of dialogue, is optional. It is here that the translator is likely to meet a problem. The quotative formula may be made up of a Hebrew verb of speaking alone, "he said", "she said", "they said", with no other reference to the participants. The translator then has to recover the identity of the participants from the narration.

We can usually expect the narration to make some clear reference to those who have a part in the story. There are however, instances where the identity of

a participant may be missing from the quotative formula and the narration as well. One example of such an omission is found in the first episode of Ruth. When Naomi accompanied by Ruth returns to Bethlehem from Moab, this is how it is told in the Hebrew: "So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem the whole town was excited about them, and they said, 'Is this Naomi?' " (1.19). The Hebrew quotative formula is represented by just the third person plural feminine verb form *wattō'marnāh* "and-they-said". But who is the plural feminine participant who speaks the words that follow?

The ancient Greek translation (LXX or Septuagint) and KJV render the Hebrew literally. But neither the Greek verb form, nor KJV's "and they said", can show the feminine gender of the Hebrew verb. Readers of these two translations could assume, incorrectly, that "they" refers to "the whole town". Without even a gender distinction as an indication of who the participant might be, an important part of the story's message and a significant aspect of the story-teller's art is lost in these translations. The identify of the subject of the Hebrew verb "and-they-said" is absent from the text itself. The translator must retrieve the identity of the participant from the situational context.

The feminine plural form of the verb tells us that the participant has to be female. Since the conversation is taking place in Bethlehem, soon after the arrival of Naomi and Ruth there, the obvious possibility is a group of women from the town. For reasons we cannot go into here, the story-teller chose to leave out any reference to this participant from the text. The translator of course cannot copy the Hebrew writer's style and reproduce the Hebrew form without making difficulties for his reader. Therefore, the translator must carry a clear reference in words to the other participant who is the first speaker in the dialogue. The GNB rendering "and the women there exclaimed", illustrates well how a quotative formula in a translation can be used effectively to identify the participant, and also to express the mood of the speaker and the group's relation to the town as part to the whole.

Genesis 29.1-8

A second example of missing identity in the Hebrew text is in the story of Jacob, in Genesis 29.1-8. Here is a literal translation of the passage which by itself shows where the problem is:

1. Jacob set off and walked to the land of the people of the east. 2. He looked and behold a well in the field. Behold there were three flocks of sheep lying beside it; for from that well (they) watered the sheep. Now there was a large stone over the mouth of the well. 3. When all the flocks were gathered there (they) would roll away the stone from the mouth of the well and (they) would water the sheep. Then (they) would put back the stone to its place over the mouth of the well.
4. Jacob said to [them], "My brothers, from where are you?" [They] said, "We are from Haran."
5. He said to [them], "Do you know Laban son of Nahor?" [They] said, "We know him"
6. He said to [them], "Does it go well for him?" [They] said, "It goes well. Look! Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep."
7. He said, "Look, it is still high day, not the time for the animals to be gathered. Water the sheep and go pasture them"
8. [They] said, "[We] cannot until all the flocks are gathered. They (they) will roll the stone from the mouth of the well and [we] will water the sheep."

Two people in the story are identified by their personal names. They are Jacob and Rachel. There are two other participants in the story, but the story-teller does not identify them either by name or any other designation in the narration. One of the unknown participants is represented by (they) in round brackets, the other is represented by [they], [them], and [we] in the square brackets. The second group are the ones that Jacob addresses as “my brothers” (verse 4).

Let us look first at how some of the English translations have tried to deal with the problem of the omission of any reference to these two group participants in the Hebrew text. RSV, NEB, GNB and NIV have used passive verbs in two verses of the passage, providing the verbs with a grammatical subject where the Hebrew has active verbs with no separate subject: for example, “The flocks were watered from this well” (verse 2, GNB); “We can’t do that until all the flocks are here and the stone has been rolled back,” (verse 8, GNB). The message is complete and intelligible to the reader who has no need to ask the question, “watered by whom?” Of course languages which have no passives cannot restructure the verbs in the same way. In verse 3 however, RSV, GNB and NIV have supplied a noun subject for the active verbs by identifying the participant referred to by (they) as “the shepherds”. RSV reads “and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep . . .”. As in the Ruth story the English translators have supplied the identity of the participant from the situational context. “The shepherds” is an adequate designation of the participant omitted by the Hebrew writer. In languages which have no passives translators may wish to use an equivalent for “shepherds” at verse 2 and verse 8 as the subject of the verbs referred to above.

NEB has a different translation at verses 3 and 8, which involves a proposal to change the reading in the Hebrew text. The proposal is to change the Hebrew word for “the flocks” to the word meaning “the shepherds”. The NEB rendering which changes the meaning of the original reads: “and all the herdsmen used to gather there and roll it (the stone) off the mouth of the well and water the flocks” (verse 3). However, there is little justification for the change that NEB has made to the text. And translators would need to assess carefully the NEB rendering and the commentaries that propose such a change before adopting the same solution. (The change is made on the basis of readings in the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch.)

Let us consider next the translation of verses 1-3 in another different language. The 1935 version of the Sinhala Bible has translated these verses literally. It has reproduced the Hebrew form faithfully, retaining the active plural verbs without a separate subject. I tested the Sinhala translation using four native speakers of the language, one of them a linguist. None of them had any difficulty with the translation of these verses in the Sinhala Bible. They all insisted that the message was complete as it was. The reason was that the way the Hebrew story-teller had presented the narration was exactly the way a Sinhala story-teller would have presented it. The Hebrew narration is describing something which happened regularly in a particular given situation. The narration is so structured that the practice itself is the focus, so that a separate

subject is not required for the adequate interpretation of the actions expressed in the active verbs. This is a feature of Hebrew discourse that is also common to Sinhala. Because of this close identity between Hebrew and Sinhala discourse a literal translation of the narration in Sinhala is completely intelligible and acceptable to the reader. If there are other languages which also share this discourse feature with the Hebrew, it is best to render the narration in the most natural way in that language. Of course the translator must make sure that the whole message is communicated.

When we come to the unit of dialogue which begins at verse 4, the introductory Hebrew quotative formula literally reads, "Jacob said to [them]". Only one of the participants, Jacob, is explicitly identified as speaker, while the people being spoken to are represented by a pronoun form [them]. Who is the other party interacting with Jacob in the conversation recorded in verses 4-8? The Hebrew story-teller has omitted any reference to this participant from the entire text. We therefore have no clear reference in the text to the people represented by the pronouns [they] and [them] in square brackets.

Let us examine the attempts made to resolve the problem in some of the translations. GNB and NIV introduce the dialogue with the quotative formula, "Jacob asked the shepherds". These translations have supplied a designation "the shepherds", to identify the participant who is in conversation with Jacob. These versions have tried to remove the difficulty present in the Hebrew text; but have created some ambiguities by designating the other participant as "the shepherds". Is the reader to assume that "the shepherds" interacting with Jacob here are the same group as "the shepherds" in verse 3? The two participants are given the same designation in the English translations, but they are not really the same. "The shepherds" of verse 3 are the subject of the action of rolling away the stone from the mouth of the well after all the flocks are gathered there. They are therefore absent from the scene of the conversation. They are the third party whom the people talking to Jacob refer to when they say, "We can't do that until all the flocks are here and the stone has been rolled back; then we will water the flocks" (verse 8, GNB). The identity of the agent of the action of rolling the stone back in verse 8 and the identity of the subject of the same action in verse 3 are the same. It is clear then that the people in conversation with Jacob are a fourth participant and must be distinguished from "the shepherds" mentioned in verse 3. The identity of this fourth participant can only be discovered from the situation context. When Jacob arrived at the well there were already three flocks of sheep there. When he says, "water the sheep and pasture them", (verse 7) he can only be talking to the men who were watching over the three flocks.

A literal rendering of the Hebrew formula, "Jacob said to them", in RSV and NEB, retains the difficulty of the original. And similarities between Hebrew and Sinhala discourse end where the unit of dialogue begins, so the 1935 Sinhala version also becomes difficult here. It translates the Hebrew quotative formula literally and this was a problem for the Sinhala readers I referred to above. They could not figure out who Jacob was talking to. One of them thought that Jacob was in dialogue with his brothers, because Jacob addressed the other party as, "My brothers" (verse 4). For an accurate and complete

translation of the dialogue, the person being addressed when the conversation opens must not only be clearly identified, but must also be distinguished from any other participant referred to in the narration or the dialogue.

A second rule that Hebrew story-tellers followed was that every change in speech turns must be marked by a quotative formula. What this means is that every time one of the participants in a conversation took a turn at speaking it was signalled by a quotative formula. This is clearly illustrated in the passage from the Jacob story. Every speech by Jacob is signalled by a quotative formula and every response made by the other party is signalled by the quotative formula "they said". Again we see that the quotative formula occupies a fixed position, always preceding the words of the speaker.

Some languages allow more variation in the way changes in turns at speaking are marked in dialogue. This flexibility is reflected in some English translations. English structure permits the speech of one participant to run on from the speech of the other without a quotative formula coming in between. Quotation marks only, or quotation marks and spacing, adequately mark the place where the words of one participant end and the words of the other participant begin. For example,

NEB: "Jacob said to them, 'Where are you from, my friends?' 'We are from Haran', they replied."

GNB: "Jacob asked the shepherds, 'My friends, where are you from?' 'From Haran,' they answered."

In both translations the words of the men watching over the three flocks run on from the words spoken by Jacob. In NEB they are separated by quotation marks alone, while GNB uses both quotation marks and line spacing to separate the two speeches. The quotative formula is placed after the words spoken by the men interacting with Jacob. Modern English story-writers frequently use the spacing of lines and quotation marks to separate one participant's speech from the other's, omitting the quotative formula altogether, over a stretch of conversation. This is a very effective way of structuring quick, short exchanges in a dialogue. For instance the first few exchanges between Jacob and the other party could be restructured in this way. Here is how we could write verses 4-6:

Jacob asked the men watching over the three flocks,

"Friends, where are you from?"

"From Haran."

"Do you know Laban son of Nahor?"

"Yes, we do."

"Is all well with him?"

"Yes, all's well. Now here comes Rachel, his daughter, with his flock."

Of course any restructuring of the Hebrew dialogue will need to be done keeping in mind what is allowed by the structure of the language in which the translation is being made, and what is acceptable to the audience. What is important is that the dialogue must be structured so as to ensure that the reader clearly understands who is the speaker every time there is a change in speaker.

The Hebrew story-teller would sometimes use only the Hebrew verb form as a quotative formula over a long stretch of dialogue to signal every change in

speech turns. Where there is no gender and number distinction between the participants, a literal translation of the quotative formula could result in a lot of confusion for the reader. Abraham's plea to God for Sodom (Gen 18.22–33) is an example of a long dialogue between two individuals of the same gender. Yet the Hebrew writer selects only the verb form *wayyo'mer*, "he said", to mark the changes in speech turns over a long stretch of the dialogue (verses 28–32). RSV is quoted here to illustrate the problem that the reader has when the quotative formula is rendered literally:

27. Abraham answered, "Behold I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 28. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." 29. Again he spoke to him, and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 30. Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." 31. He said, "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." 32. Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

Without any designation in the quotative formula to distinguish the participant who is speaking from the one who is being addressed the reader can become confused trying to keep track of when God is speaking and when Abraham is speaking.

GNB serves as an excellent model for restructuring verses 28–32 in a way that removes the difficulty in the original. The translator has used line spacing to separate the words of the participants and used different quotative formulas to distinguish the words spoken by Abraham from the words spoken by God. Abraham's words are introduced by a formula that always names him as speaker, while the words of God are, in contrast, introduced by the formula "he said".

Dialogue figures prominently in the ancient Hebrew art of story-telling. In order to tell the OT stories well for today's readers, the translator needs to restructure dialogue so that the reader has the information necessary for the adequate interpretation of each unit of dialogue. There must be clear reference to the participants and clear signals to distinguish the speaker and the person being addressed when the participants take turns at speaking.