

CONCERNING THE NEW TRANSLATION OF THE KOREAN BIBLE

The following article originally appeared in the Korean Bible Magazine for April 1962. It was one of a series of articles the purpose of which was to inform a large and varied constituency of some of the essential problems which must be solved in the course of any revision of a major standard Bible. We reproduce it here not only because of its content, but because it is in one sense a pattern of what should always be done in comparable situations, namely to keep the whole constituency fully and clearly informed of all that is involved in the preparation of their new Bible. Translators know these problems only too well; the ordinary user only too often can wax impatient at the many delays in the appearance of his book, not understanding the frustrations and manifold complexities which must first be cleared away. Needless to say, one article alone cannot serve this purpose. It must be part of a regular process. The Korean Bible Society is to be congratulated on devoting a whole issue of its journal to questions of this kind.—Ed.

It has been my privilege for the past year and a half to attend the weekly meetings of the Korean Bible Translation Committee as a liaison member for the British and Foreign Bible Society, which is providing the major part of the financial requirements of this project. Let me hasten to make it clear that I am in no sense a translator, only a kind of literary secretary. But this job has given me a peculiar opportunity to get the feel of the new work.

The first thing that I am bound to do is to report the good spirit of the team of translators. It takes a kind of intellectual humility, a kind which is rare anywhere, and perhaps especially in Korea, to work on a joint translation. This is particularly true of the man who makes the first draft. There is no need for Mr Pak, the drafter, or the chairman, Dr Chon, and the other members of the committee to be in the least embarrassed if I note with pleasure and thankfulness that the team works well. The Bible Society continues to be a shining example of Christian co-operation across the barbed wires of Korean denominational boundaries. For this fact the Church at large is not, I fear, sufficiently thankful before God. If it were, then among other things, the local support for the Bible Society would be stronger.

For several years the British and Foreign Bible Society has been preparing a new aid for translators in the form of a diglot Greek-English New Testament. The Greek text is a new one prepared chiefly by Professor Kilpatrick of Oxford. The English text is a new translation made solely with the needs of translators in view—it does not aim at being readable or literary, only at being accurate and unambiguous. This is being used as the primary basis for the new Korean version of the New Testament.

The complete version of this Greek text has not yet been published. It is in many ways a revolutionary text. It might best be explained by saying

that it is partly based on the theory that a Latin text of the Bible which is older than any surviving Greek text has great importance in determining what the original Greek text was because it shows what the Church understood the Greek text to mean at a very early date. So in some cases this text differs from the texts which most theological students are at present accustomed to.

In the greater number of cases the Korean committee has preferred to retain the readings of the previously generally received text. But it is very rare that these differences of opinion have any important bearing on the Bible's message.

Correspondence with the London Translations Department of the B.F.B.S. has shown that the standard of our committee is a high one. It is not uncommon for translations into modern Asian and African languages, even quite important languages, to be made by committees of nationals or missionaries whose academic level is less than high. It was with such groups in mind that most of the work on the translators' diglot already mentioned was undertaken. Our Korean committee will not readily forgive me for stating the obvious, but since I had the opportunity several years ago of sitting in at some sessions of the British committee preparing the diglot translation itself, I am well aware that our Korean translators are adequately equipped to sit in those committees on an equal footing, at least so far as technical scriptural knowledge is concerned.

But of course there is always a double problem in translation. It is not enough to know well the language *from* which you are translating. You must be more than merely competent in the language *into* which you are translating. If you are translating into your own language you must be an expert in it. Many people do not pause to think that being a native speaker does not make you an expert speaker. The problem is made even more complex by the fact that a good speaker is not necessarily a good writer.

Now Korean is in a most interesting stage of development at the present time. It is being written with increasing frequency, but not always with increasing intelligibility and grace. It is not sufficient to blame the Japanese colonial government for the fact that Korean literary language is still in a comparatively early stage of evolution. It is true that the Japanese domination seriously harmed Korean literature, but it is also true that the history of Korean prose writing is very short. In fact there was very little of it before the twentieth century, and a great deal of that was translation. Missionaries and Christians took an important and noble part in the development of Korean prose (Dr Gale's *Pilgrim's Progress* is the classic case), but this was essentially an evolution of a church style, based on classic Korean writing. The Bible was naturally translated into this style, which was partly new but essentially old. It is this kind of language which we still meet in the Korean Bible, and which is all too often the only style that foreign missionaries are conversant with at all. All the same, it is unfair to refer to it as 'missionary Korean'. It is perhaps nearer the mark today to call it 'ecclesiastical Korean'. It can be found in many Roman Catholic as well as Presbyterian books.

Meanwhile the literary folk, who, with notable exceptions like Chon Yong'

taek, tend not to be Christians and not to read the Bible very much, have developed quite another style of writing Korean prose. And since 1950 this development has been accelerated.

In any country it is rare to find a theologian who is a good stylist, and it is clear that in view of the above situation in the growth of Korean literary style, it will be even harder to find men who combine both skills in Korea. Nor must we forget that the modern Korean spelling and grammar are not yet naturally used by a great many people, even distinguished people, so that publishers' editors must watch carefully for the spelling of the books that pass through their hands.

It is therefore good to find collaboration between our translators and their literary advisers, one of whom sits in at the weekly meetings of the committee. In fact the largest amount of time spent in the meetings tends to be devoted to questions of Korean style and expression.

It is only to be expected that the version they are producing will at first seem strange and odd to people accustomed to the archaic grammar of the present Bible. Missionaries may even find that features of the written language that they were brought up to believe were essential, have in the new version disappeared. For example, the long sentences have been broken up into rather shorter ones, and direct speech has been introduced in place of the rather cumbrous indirect speech of the older book.

Some people, of course, will be sorry about all this. But they should remember the harder facts about the present Bible. If we are honest we must admit that it is a difficult book. (I am inclined to believe that the best piece of translation work so far done in Korean was Ross's.) It is bad because it is possible for a learned young non-Christian Korean to say: 'I can read the Bible with pleasure in English, French, or German, but I cannot read it with pleasure in Korean'. (The man who said this was a great lover of old Korean literature, so he was not put off by the archaism.) It is bad because it is so very difficult to read aloud so as to be easily understood by the hearer. It is bad because some of the simplest parts of the Old Testament are exceedingly difficult to understand. I have been growing more and more appalled by the low standard of reading the Bible aloud in Korean churches. I am also assured that the reading of the Old Testament in the Korean Church at large is nothing like so widespread as it ought to be. There are many reasons for these things, but an important reason in each case is the difficulty simply of understanding the Bible.

It is not just a matter of 'removing the Chinese vocabulary'. There are many unnecessarily difficult Chinese words, it is true; but it is the whole style and structure of the Korean sentences that are the real trouble. Experimental use of parts of the new translation in my own church has proved the effectiveness of the new translation. It is not a 'colloquial version'; it is an 'intelligible version'—intelligible, that is, to the modern man.

People who value and love dignified worship, especially those who, like myself, have had their faith nurtured in a great catholic liturgical tradition, may fear that this approach to translation of the Bible will spoil the dignity of church services. They need not worry. I have used the new translation for the solemn chanting of the passion story in the midst of the very solemn

and dramatic liturgy which my church uses on Palm Sunday. Far from detracting from the dignity of the worship, the splendid simplicity and directness of the new version improved it immeasurably.

But we ought to expect it to do so. The power of the Scriptures is not in their literary style, but in their message. The new translation is one that concerns itself with making the message clear to the reader above all else.

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SECOND THOUGHTS ON MEASURING 'NATURALNESS'

In the April 1963 issue of *The Bible Translator*, Joseph Grimes discussed the question of naturalness in a translation. He presented a system for determining 'whether a translation is reasonably similar in certain respects to an original composition in the receptor language'. The system is based on '(1) counting the number of times selected features occur in a sample of the translation, (2) counting the number of times the same features occur in a matching sample of text material in the receptor language, and (3) evaluating whatever discrepancies there are between the two, using a simplified statistical table supplied for the purpose'.

If applied conscientiously by Bible translators, this will do much to help remove the foreign flavor that creeps in so easily. However, as I have attempted to apply Grimes's system and others,¹ serious questions have come up in two areas.²

First, it became evident that in some situations it is neither possible nor desirable to use certain grammatical features in a way which is 'natural' in the sense that it agrees statistically with the usage in available receptor language texts. Secondly, among various texts in the receptor language itself the variation in grammatical features may go far beyond the statistical limits set by Grimes's procedure.

Necessary Exceptions to 'Naturalness'

Certain grammatical features are tied closely to certain semantic features, and when this is the case the frequency of these features in translation should be guided by the meaning content of Scripture, regardless of the frequency of these grammatical features in receptor language texts.

¹ J. Beekman, 'Questionnaire for Translators in New Languages', *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 12, p. 119; and B. Moore, 'A Statistical Morphosyntactic Typology Study of Colorado (Chibcha)', *International Journal of American Linguistics*, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 298. Note section 3.4.

² This paper was originally presented as a seminar at the Spring 1963 session of the translation workshop held periodically by the Wycliffe Bible Translators at Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo, Mexico, and was discussed with Grimes at that time.