

FREQUENCY OF VERBS: IS OUR TRANSLATION NATURAL?

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We are advisors to the Hadiyya Translation Project in Ethiopia, and have recently been working on Exodus 25–31. These chapters contain the instructions which God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai for building the tent for worship. We decided it would be interesting to compare the instructions as they are given in Hebrew, in a good English translation, and in the Hadiyya translation. At the same time we planned to compare the Hadiyya translation of these chapters with some “procedure texts” we had collected in the Hadiyya language. (By procedure texts we mean complete instructions for something, spoken originally in Hadiyya, and not translated.)

One of the things we studied was the way verbs are used in Hebrew, in English, in the Hadiyya translation, and in Hadiyya texts. For example, when we counted the frequency of the verbs in Hebrew and in English, for the same sections of Exodus, we discovered the following:

Hebrew: about 18% (that is, about every 5th word)

English: about 10% (that is, about every 10th word)

(Verbs can be used as the main word in a clause: “The pole *was made* of acacia wood.” *Was made* is a verb, and we counted cases like this. Verbs can also be used to qualify a noun: “The pole which *was made* of acacia wood . . .” The word “which” shows that the verb *was made* is only part of the phrase about the pole, and we did not count such cases.)

That was an interesting discovery! Our Good News Bible was using verbs only half as often as Hebrew! “Why?” we thought to ourselves. There are several different reasons, and here we will only discuss two which are interesting for translators.

1. In Exodus 25.13, 14, Hebrew speaks of making “poles . . . in order to carry the Box with them.” (See RSV.) GNB translates this as “carrying-poles”. In grammar, “carrying-poles” is a noun, and a Hebrew verb (clause) has been “lost”. We are not *criticising GNB here*: it is good English, clear and tasty! But it shows us one reason why an English translation may have a lower frequency of verbs than the Hebrew original: in English grammar it is often better to use the corresponding noun rather than the verb—this is just the kind of language English is.

2. In Ex 25.11, Hebrew reads

“*You shall overlay* it with pure gold; inside and outside *shall you overlay* it.”

In the first clause we are told the material to be used to cover the Box: pure gold. In the second clause it is made clear that both inside and outside must be covered. In GNB the verb is not repeated, and the Hebrew is collapsed to:

“Cover it with pure gold inside and out . . .”

By rearranging the information the verb is used only once, and the sentence is better English. (In fact, we can say, now it *is* English!).

Summarizing this, we can say that in GNB:

1. some Hebrew verbs become nouns in English translation,

2. sentences are sometimes rearranged so that one verb carries more information than in Hebrew, and fewer verbs are used.

The result is, the frequency of verbs is reduced very much, and the quality of English is improved very much. (A third important factor is that many times one Hebrew word is equal to two or three separate words in English. By itself this lowers the frequency for English.)

When we turned to our Hadiyya translation, we discovered the following:

<i>Hebrew</i>	18% verbs
<i>English trans.</i>	10% verbs
<i>Hadiyya trans.</i>	12% verbs
<i>Hadiyya texts</i>	35% verbs

It seems our Hadiyya translation keeps close to English . . . but it is very different from what we find in Hadiyya texts. In such texts, about preparing food, building a house, making a door, and so on, we find that about one word in every three is a verb. However in the translation we were far from that!

When we first started discussing this with the Hadiyya team, the translators themselves were not convinced. "Let us collect texts ourselves," they said, "and we will look at them together." And so we did. One translator took a tape-recorder at the weekend and asked different people to record on it . . . Next week they wrote out each recording, correcting the hesitations and stumblings and grammatical slips, and we studied them together. In that way the translators themselves began to see some things about their language: "Yes, there are many verbs!" Every two or three or four words we noticed a verb.

Is the difference important?

We agreed that Hadiyya uses verbs frequently, while our translation does not. But is it important? There are no grammatical mistakes in the translation, so why should we expect it to have the same percentage of verbs as texts collected in the language?

Let us look at an example. It is possible to translate Ex 25.10-14 into English as follows:

"From acacia wood, make a box 110 cm long, 66 cm wide and 66 cm high, which is covered inside and out with pure gold, edged by a gold border and carried by two poles of acacia wood themselves plated with gold and secured by four gold rings, two rings on each side of the box near the legs."

There is no grammatical mistake in this sentence, but who would judge it to be a good translation? No-one, surely. The grammar of the language may permit us to write in a way which is correct grammar, but poor style, and poor communication.

In this example we have produced a long sentence which has only one clause, "make a box", and only one verb, "make". (All other verbs are of the kind noted above, "which is covered", "edged", "carried"—their work is inside the single clause "make a box".)

We can criticize this "English" translation for a number of reasons. Firstly, the verb "make" is forced to do too much work, to carry too much information. The sentence may not contain any grammatical mistake, but it is not

natural grammar, it is too heavy. People do not normally speak English in this way. When we look at Hadiyya texts we often find that each verb may carry one or two phrases. Some verbs carry no phrases, and three phrases per verb is quite rare. That is, Hadiyya does not like too much information with one verb, or in one clause. (It is possible to write sentences having more phrases—and very occasionally we find one in a text, but it is not usual.)

When we read the sentence carefully, the information is clear (perhaps!), but there is a real danger that the arrangement of information will confuse many people. It will certainly bore them! Imagine, our translation of God telling Moses about how he wants the people to worship, and we make it boring!

It seems in this attempted translation that God is describing the finished product to Moses. “Make a gold-plated wooden-box with carrying-poles—you are the craftsman, I leave the details to you, but here is what it should look like.” But this is not the original thought of these verses in Hebrew. God is giving Moses careful, step-by-step instructions *how to make* the box. By a sentence which is grammatically correct we have possibly confused the main aim of the whole section. We have suggested that God gives an outline of what he wants, and places his order with Moses, instead of showing that he was giving detailed instructions and plans. That is, if we are content that our translation is grammatically correct, and keeps close to GNB or RSV as we work, we may many times be guilty of distorting the thought of each paragraph.

To translate the thought of each paragraph clearly, it is not enough that our sentences are grammatically correct—they must be in a style carefully chosen to carry the correct thoughts in the natural way of the language. This may mean for example, that we must adjust the sentences in order to carry the information in the natural way of the language. In terms of our example from Hadiyya, that will include taking care over the frequency of the verbs.

The Preface of GNB (page viii) says

“... there has been no attempt to reproduce in English the parts of speech, sentence-structure, word-order, and grammatical devices of the original languages.”

In trying to have the same aim, translators in many places around the world need to say, “Yes, it is important to compare the frequency of verbs in our translation with the frequency in local texts.” A good translator will arrange the information so that it follows the actual, common patterns of his language. He will not be content that his work is grammatically correct: he will work hard to write in good style, comparing his work with suitable texts.

We have described one way of making that comparison, not a difficult way. Why not try it yourself, on your own translation? As well as the frequency of verbs, you can easily compare some other things. How are sentences connected? How many phrases belong to one verb in each clause? How long are the sentences? or how short?

Can we do this with the Bible?

We have recommended that translators should study texts in their own languages, and use them to guide the form of language they accept in their translations. But some translators may want to ask, “Are we free to do this in the Word of God?”

We *are* free to rearrange the words and grammar of the Biblical message in whatever way is necessary in each language. Our aim, if we follow the one given in GNB, is not to “reproduce the parts of speech, sentence-structure, word order and grammatical devices” of Greek or Hebrew or English . . . in our translation. Our aim is to

“present the Biblical content and message in standard, everyday, natural language” (GNB, Foreword).

It is good to note well these words of GNB: “standard, everyday, natural language”. These three words overlap in their meanings here, to make a very forceful claim. The language must be *standard*: acceptable to a native speaker as correct, tasty, of good style, conforming in every way to what he expects of his language. It must be *everyday* language: not unusual in its choice of words, or sentence structures. It must be *natural*: following the accustomed ways of speaking that language, not foreign sounding, not artificial language in any way.

So, the meaning we cannot change: but the choice of words, the forms of grammar, these things can be altered freely in our struggle to communicate the message of the Word of God.

How can we change?

The many adjustments that can and should be made in translating cannot all be discussed here. We will restrict the discussion to the case discussed above: How can we increase the frequency of verbs in our translation, to make it similar to the frequency we find in the speech of ordinary people, or in recorded text? And, how can we do this so that we can still claim to be careful, faithful translators of God’s Word?

Before giving a proper answer to this, it is helpful to understand, and to believe with confidence, one important feature of *all* communication. Every communication has two parts: the actual words, and information which is *implicit*. Implicit information is a part of the message which is not stated in words, but accompanies the words. For example, walking in the centre of Addis Ababa, we can hear every day someone shouting the words “Piassa! Fifty!” For most of you as you read this, it is meaningless, but every inhabitant of Addis Ababa understands completely. They understand because they are aware of the implicit or hidden information; you do not understand because you do not carry the implicit information in your mind. If you are to understand the message, you must be told the implicit information. That is easy to do. We simply put into words the information that is implicit for everyone in Addis Ababa:

“Taxi-driver! I want to go to Piassa Square. If you will take me there I will pay double fare—that is, fifty cents.”

Now you can understand the message correctly. We have not changed it; we have added words, but to the meaning we have added nothing.

It is important for translators to understand and be fully convinced that every message—including the message of the Bible—always includes implicit information which is an essential part of the communication. It is important for

translators to be fully convinced that faithful translation work must frequently put into words part of the information which is implicitly known by the first hearers. Sometimes a few words will be “added” in order that the message may be correctly understood. Sometimes extra words are required for the sake of the grammar or style.

With this thought clearly in mind, we can now look at three important ways in which we can solve the problem noticed in our Hadiyya translation, a low frequency of verbs.

1. We can express in words, or make *explicit*, a verb which completes the thought of a phrase. Many times it is necessary or good to do this. For example, in GNB Ex 25.10 says:

“Make a box out of acacia wood, 110 cm long, 66 cm wide and 66 cm high.”

In many languages it will be necessary to rearrange this, separating the information by making some verbs explicit. One possible way of rearranging it would be as follows:

“*Take* acacia wood, *prepare* it (dress it), and make a box. The box *must be* 110 cm long, 66 cm wide, and 66 cm high.”

The words underlined have been made explicit. In Hebrew they are implicit. Now, we are not saying that our suggestion is the best way for everyone to translate this verse; we are only showing how it is possible to make verbs explicit, completing the thought.

2. Many times a preposition like “in”, “at”, “to”, “from”, hides a verb. In translation, that verb can be made explicit.

For example, in GNB Ex 29.10, 11 reads

“10 Bring the bull to the front of the Tent of my presence and tell Aaron and his sons to put their hands on its head. 11 Kill the bull there in my holy presence at the entrance of the Tent.”

In verse 11 the place where the bull is to be killed is given three times: (1) “there” (that is, at the front of the Tent—verse 10), (2) “in my holy presence” (3) “at the entrance of the Tent”. In many languages it is not good to include all three phrases in one clause with “kill the bull”. The information must be rearranged. If we read Leviticus 1–7, we find that “at the entrance of the Tent” covers two thoughts. First, it refers to arriving at the entrance to the compound where the tent is, with a sacrifice to offer (see Lev 1.3). Secondly it refers to entering the compound and going to the altar (see Lev 1.5, where the altar is described as being at the entrance of the tent). This helps us to understand that in Ex 29.11 “at the entrance of the Tent” can be translated as “entering the compound of the Tent”. (Notice that we have to make clear they do not enter the Tent itself, only the compound.) Verse 11 then could be rearranged to read

“Entering the compound of the Tent, standing in my holy Presence, kill the bull”.

Improving the English we get

“Come into the compound and kill the bull while standing there in my holy Presence.”

As a second example, consider Ex 29.1, “. . . to dedicate them as priests in my service.” (GNB). Here the preposition *as* does not mean “as” or “like”, but it speaks of those people *becoming* priests.

3. Many words which are nouns in the source language—English, or even Hebrew—can be translated as verbs. This is one of the basic principles of translation, and is taught to every translator. We would hope that every translator is using this principle every day! But if not, at least it is not a new thought. As an example we can take the GNB translation of Ex 29.1, quoted above. The word “service” is a noun. It could have been translated in verb form. For example, “. . . dedicate them that they may serve me by becoming priests.” Many words which are nouns in the English versions are better translated as verbs in other languages. We should not neglect this way, which is perhaps the easiest of the three ways mentioned here.

Well then. Have you done some study of texts in your language? What about this very simple matter, the frequency of verbs? How does your translation compare with the texts? Should there be a higher frequency in the translation? We have tried to illustrate three ways in which you can improve your translation in this respect. Using each of these three ways wisely and skilfully, you can improve your translation, producing work which is truly faithful to God, communicating clearly and in tasty language the Good News he wants everyone to know and understand.

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A SUGGESTION FOR TRANSLATING THE NAMES OF PRECIOUS STONES

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In many West African languages mother-tongue translators have worked hard to avoid transliterations of words like *sabbath*, *temple*, *synagogue*, and so on, in order to provide readable and more readily understandable popular language translations. However, for some reason or other the names of precious and semi-precious stones have not been included in this process; they are still being transliterated. These transliterations create a number of problems because only a few of the African cultures have any knowledge of gem stones. Even those languages which have names for one or two kinds of gem stones (for instance, Shona of Zimbabwe which has several myths about emeralds) invariably lack a general term to cover all precious stones. This means that in all African languages passages like Ex 28.17–20, Ex 39.10–13, Ezek 28.13, and Rev 21.19–21, which contain lists of gem stones, often sound like gibberish.

In this article I want review the options open to a translator seeking to make a readily understandable translation and to suggest at least one method that has proven useful in a number of languages.

Some different approaches

Older translations have generally merely transliterated the biblical names without any kind of generic classifier, producing lists like *dyasiperi*, *saphiri*, *agati*, *emeraldidi*, *onikisi*, and so on (Rev 21.19–20).