

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND BIBLE TRANSLATION

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A good part of the impetus toward the present widespread production of new and more meaningful translations of the Scriptures into many of the languages of the world has been made possible by the development of the theory of dynamic equivalence translation, particularly in the work of Eugene A. Nida.¹ The theory has been formulated from insights in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, communication theory, and other studies. Its emphasis is not only on translations which are more meaningful to modern readers than are older translations, but on ones which at the same time remain faithful to the original meaning, at least on the levels of words and sentences in their immediate contexts.

One of the most significant contributions of the theory of dynamic equivalence translation is that it provides some measure of faithfulness. We can assess, for example, whether or not "it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (RSV) and "It is God's power to save all who believe" (TEV) are equivalent in meaning; we can also know whether either or both of them is equivalent to the meaning of the Greek which they translate. We are therefore able to translate with an assurance which would not be possible otherwise.

The great strength of the theory of dynamic equivalence translation, then, is in the way in which it helps translators with the meanings of words and sentences in immediate context and gives tools for translating them. It is being fruitfully extended also into the logical relationships between sentences so that some of these relationships can be stated more explicitly,² although we still have a long way to go before translators can use all of this research with full confidence and understanding.

But there are many aspects of the larger organization of "discourse" on which the present theory is not very helpful; vague generalizations apply rather than precise, explicit understanding. "Discourse analysis" is one of the terms often used for efforts to study such larger organization of texts,³ and it is an

¹ Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber: *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1969; William L. Wonderly: *Bible Translations for Popular Use*. Stuttgart: UBS, 1968; John Beekman and John Callow: *Translating the Word of God*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974.

² Beekman and Callow, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-342; Eugene A. Nida: *Exploring Semantic Structures*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1975, pp. 50-65.

³ Some of the other terms used are "textlinguistics" and "generative poetics". The following works represent a variety of views on discourse analysis and would serve as an introduction to the field: Joseph E. Grimes: *The Thread of Discourse*. The Hague: Mouton, 1975; William O. Hendricks: *Essays on Semiolinguistics and Verbal Art*. The Hague: Mouton, 1973; Robert E. Longacre: *Philippine Languages: Discourse, Paragraph and Sentence Structure*. Santa Ana, Cal.: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1968, and *Hierarchy and Universality of Discourse Constituents in New Guinea Languages*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University School of Languages and Linguistics, 1972; Teun A. van Dijk: *Some Aspects of Text Grammars*. The Hague: Mouton, 1972; Jonathan Culler: *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975; Kathleen Callow: *Discourse Considerations in Translating the Word of God*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974; Norman R. Peterson (ed.): *Erhardt Gütgemann's 'Generative Poetics', Semeia 6, 1976* (English translation of articles first published in *Linguistica Biblica*).

emphasis which is becoming constantly more important in linguistics, as well as in other fields of study which include language. In this term I include any study which seeks to make explicit the nature of spoken and/or written text and the process of forming and understanding it.

The question for translation, however, is whether attempts to understand how texts are organized can really give help in their translation as the insights so far brought into dynamic equivalence theory have helped with lower-level structures. Can we judge “dynamic equivalence” of translation on a higher level than we are now able to judge it and make our evaluation there less intuitive? The answers must be tentative because we know so little, but here I would like to give two examples which I believe illustrate that we can make use of discourse analysis very profitably in translation.

If we compare the TEV for Amos 5.4–6 with the RSV (a fairly literal translation of the Hebrew) we can see illustrations of many of the features of dynamic equivalence as presently practised:

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:

“Seek me and live;

but do not seek Bethel,
and do not enter into Gilgal
or cross over to Beer-sheba;

for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,
and Bethel shall come to nought.”

Seek the LORD and live,

lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,

and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel, . . . (RSV)

The LORD says to the people of Israel, “Come to me, and you will live. Do not go to Beersheba to worship. Do not try to find me at Bethel—Bethel will come to nothing. Do not go to Gilgal—her people are doomed to exile.”

Go to the LORD, and you will live. If you do not go, he will sweep down like fire on the people of Israel. The fire will burn up the people of Bethel, and no one will be able to put it out. (TEV)

TEV here translate as prose rather than as poetry because its translators consider poetry to be unnatural for prophetic-type statements in English.⁴ TEV typically clarifies “house of Israel” as “people of Israel”; it interprets “seek me” as “come to me”; it makes explicit information like “to worship” which is implicit in the Hebrew; it puts together the two references to Bethel which are separated in the RSV, as also the two references to Gilgal. These and other aspects of the TEV are standard in dynamic equivalence translation, leading to clarity of meaning which, after faithfulness of meaning, is its major goal.

⁴ Keith R. Crim: “Translating the Poetry of the Bible”, TBT 23 (January) 1972, pp. 102–109. See also William A. Smalley: “Translating the Poetry of the Old Testament”, TBT 26 (April) 1975, pp. 201–211.

But if we take another look at the RSV and the Hebrew behind it, we see something about the larger structure of this short passage which is destroyed in the TEV. It can be displayed like this:

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:

- a** "Seek me and live;
- b** but do not seek Bethel,
- c** and do not enter into Gilgal
- d** or cross over to Beer-sheba;
- c** for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,
- b** and Bethel shall come to nought."
- a** Seek the LORD and live,
- e** lest he break out
- f** like a fire
- b**¹ in the house of Joseph,
- e** and it devour
- f** with none to quench it
- b**¹ for Bethel.⁵

The passage has been displayed above so as to highlight one particular structural feature, the pattern of repetition of words and ideas. At the beginning of the lines the letters indicate the same or related ideas, often with the same wording:

- a** Seek me/the LORD and live
- b** Bethel [= 'House of God']
- b**¹ house of [= people of; Bethel = 'House of God']
- c** Gilgal, go in/go out
- d** Beer-sheba (with nothing to match)
- e** action of God/fire
- f** fire/it

The least obvious relationship is that of **b**¹: house of Joseph/house of God [= Bethel], and the fact that "Bethel" in the last line has changed meaning to "people of Israel" from "place of worship" in the earlier part of the pattern.

This particular kind of patterning, with repetition sometimes in reverse order, sometimes in the same order, pervades the book of Amos not only for small passages like this but also combining larger groupings until it gives a framework for the whole book itself.⁶ But what are we to make of this for translation? According to dynamic equivalence theory, meaning takes precedence over form, and rightly so, although "meaning" is often too narrowly interpreted as information content. We know we cannot capture most of the poetic devices of one language in another when we translate.

⁵ The first part of this pattern was pointed out in Nils Wilhelm Lund: "The presence of chiasmus in the Old Testament", *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 46 (1929/30), p. 108.

⁶ Jan de Waard and William A. Smalley: *A Translator's Handbook on Amos*, 1979. United Bible Societies.

I would like to suggest, first of all, that although the TEV passage above is equivalent to the Hebrew in the content of its ideas, it is an unnecessary textual distortion, and that a great deal of textual equivalence is possible without destroying the equivalence of ideas. In saying this I am implying that the structure itself conveys certain kinds of meaning which are themselves important; and although the structures cannot necessarily be carried over in translation, their meanings should not be destroyed.

Take, for example, the fact that both RSV and TEV have divided the passage into two stanzas/paragraphs because the second part has a different speaker from the first part. The fact of different speakers is, of course, structurally important and should be recognized, but reflection of that fact in translation should not be allowed to destroy the unity which the passage otherwise shows.

Furthermore, the TEV decision not to translate as English poetry is probably right, but what kind of prose should it use? Certainly the flat and pedestrian prose of the TEV does no justice to the rhythmical repetition of this passage; but would changes to a more appropriate style make the TEV more difficult? I would like to suggest that a kind of English oratorical style would be most appropriate, and would make possible in translation something very analogous to the rhythmic repetitions of the original. Oratorical style can be artistically effective without being difficult.

Here follows one possibility of how this might be done:

The Lord says to the people of Israel:

“Come back and be my people again, so you can live!

Don't stay in 'God's House'^a to pray any more;

Don't gather at Gilgal, where you first entered this land;^b

Don't hunt for your help way off in Beersheba;

No, Gilgal will be your gate into exile,

And 'God's House' will be haunted!

Come back and follow your Lord, so you can live!”

“And if not,” said Amos,

“God's fire will sweep down

on you people in Israel,

burning the people

who live in 'God's House'—

A fire you cannot put out.”

^aHebrew: Bethel, which means 'God's House'. ^bJosh 4.19–24.

Some of the differences to be seen here are related to other aspects of Amos than those which I have been discussing. These include the use of “God's House”, “haunted”, “where you first entered this land”, and the alliteration of sounds in some of the lines.⁷ But the layout of the lines, the repetition, the attempt at rhythmical prose, it seems to me, all contribute to a greater textual equivalency of this translation to the original than do either the RSV or the TEV. At the same time, the passage is more fully a dynamic equivalence translation in the usual sense than is the TEV. The level of difficulty is certainly higher, but in my opinion it is not as high as some other passages in the TEV.⁸

⁷ These are all discussed in de Waard and Smalley, *op. cit.*

⁸ See, for example, the surprisingly high level of Genesis 1.1–2.

The main point in the above example is that some of the structural features of the passage could be matched by similar, though not identical, structural features natural to the language of the translation, and thus the translation could be made more nearly equivalent to the original in effect; also, the style of language in the translation might be chosen as the basis of an understanding of such structural features of the original.

The translational solution to be suggested for the next illustrative passage is of a different kind, one closer to present practice. It suggests that sometimes significant structural features can be highlighted by the judicious use of paragraphing and by the ways in which paragraphs are related.

Amos 2.6b–16, for example, is an important passage which has a very complicated organization, as can be seen in the following display:

Crime 1	Selling people to slavery for trivial debts	2.6b	
Crime 2	Oppressing the poor	2.7a	
Crime 3	Abuse of women, sex	2.7b	
Crime 3a	Abuse of God (result of Crime 3)	2.7c	
Crime 4a	Abuse of sacred places (location of Crime 4)	2.8a	
Crime 4	Exploiting the system of loans to the poor	2.8b	
Crime 5a	Abuse of house of God (location of Crime 5)	2.8c	
Crime 5	Exploiting the system of fines	2.8d	
	A	Salvation: Israel plus the Lord is strong	2.9-10
	B	Prophets chosen by the Lord	2.11a
	C	Nazirites chosen by the Lord	2.11b
	D	Isn't that so? . . . says the Lord	2.11c
Crime 6a	C'	Nazirites made to fail by Israel	2.12a
Crime 7a	B'	Prophets made to fail by Israel	2.12b
	A'	Punishment: Israel without the Lord is weak	2.13-16

Crimes numbered 1, 2, etc., are social injustices; those numbered 3a, 4a, etc., are crimes against God. The way in which the two series of crimes are interwoven equates the social injustices with crimes against God.

The most difficult problem in the overall organization of the passage is the way in which verses 9–11 come into it, breaking into the list of Israel's sins, plus the fact that verses 9–16 have a pattern of balanced repetition of the kind shown in the first part of the previous example, but not as obvious. This balanced pattern is shown by the A/A', B/B', etc., of the display. In addition, the actual events of verse 10 happened before those of verse 9, which is a problem for translation in many languages. Also, the last part of verse 11 does not fit into the logical flow where it is.

But the display of the structure of the passage shows that although verses 9–11 break into the line of thought and are in that sense intrusive, they are actually structurally intertwined with it. Social injustice is a crime against God; crimes against God have their climax in Israel's rejection of its special relationship to God. The fruits of that relationship were Israel's salvation through God's presence and strength. The punishment for breaking that relationship will be Israel's utter weakness without God's presence.

Coming at the peak of the patterned repetition (D in the display) is an expression which has no logical connection with the whole argument at all: "Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?" says the Lord." This is an inter-

actional expression, one which highlights the relationship between speaker and audience, one characteristic of conversation or of oratory. It asks Israel to bring the testimony of its memory to bear on the accusations, and re-emphasizes that it is Yahweh who speaks.

In both RSV and TEV the whole passage from verses 9–12 sounds seriously muddled and interrupted, and the tight relationship of verses 13–16 with verses 9–10, which is essential to the whole point of the passage, does not show up clearly at all. Should different parts of the passage be shifted around and the whole thing restructured to follow more logically and obviously? This sometimes has to be done in translation. I believe, however, that such a solution is likely to destroy some of the significant structural tensions in this passage.

I would also like to suggest that much of the problem, at least in English translation, could be taken care of by more judicious use of paragraphing and transition. I cannot take the space to reprint the RSV and TEV here for comparison; RSV has paragraph breaks at verses 9, 12, and 13; TEV has one at verse 9 only. Here is something of what I have in mind for an alternative:

⁶Listen to what the Lord says:

“You people of Israel have sinned and sinned, and I will surely punish you. You sell honest people as slaves because they cannot pay their debts; you sell poor people because they cannot pay back even the price of a pair of sandals. ⁷You trample on the weak and helpless; you trouble the miserable.

⁸“Not only you sons, but even you fathers sexually abuse the same slave girl—and dishonor me. ⁹In your places of worship you sleep on clothing kept from the poor as security for their debts—and disobey me. You yourselves drink up the wine you take from people in payment of fines—and even do it in my house, in the temple of your God.

¹⁰“—But I was the one who defeated the Amorites who stood in your way, my people! They stood tall as cedar trees and strong as oaks, but I withered their fruit and rotted their roots. ¹¹Before that I rescued you out of Egypt, and for forty years I took care of you in the barren desert until I gave you this land, this rich land of the Amorites, to be your own.

¹²“Then I chose some of your sons to be prophets, to speak my message, and called some of your young men to be Nazirites, to serve me.

“You know this is true, Israel, don’t you? It is I; It is the Lord who is reminding you!—

¹³“But you, you made the Nazirites break their vows to me, and you ordered the prophets not to speak my message.

¹⁴“So, then, I will crush you to the ground, and you will groan with weakness, as a cart groans when it is overloaded with grain.

¹⁵No escape

for your fast runners;
and for your strong,

No strength:

Warriors defenseless,

¹⁶Bowmen pushed back;

Swift-footed footmen

And mounted riders all trapped.

¹⁷Only death

for your brave soldiers
dropping their weapons

In flight
On the Day when I act.”
That is the message from the Lord himself.

The paragraph division in v. 8 sets off the part where social evil is equated with breaking the Mosaic law and dishonoring God, thus underlining the progression. The dashes at verses 9 and 11 help to show that there is a major break in the thought. It is as though this part were in parentheses, except that the passage is extremely important and parentheses might indicate that it was of less importance. But the visual dash is not all that sets the section off. (People who hear the passage read aloud cannot see dashes and paragraph indentations, but these help the person reading aloud to break up the passage properly by his intonation.) Transitional devices do so as well.

“I was the one” (v. 9) not only translates the emphatic Hebrew but also helps to contrast this paragraph with the previous one emphasizing Israel’s sins.

A new paragraph is made at the beginning of verse 11 because the action changes and because now the passage is setting up a contrast again between the Lord’s helpful acts and Israel’s disobedient ones. It is easier to see the balance between verses 11a and 12 where both are separate paragraphs.

The last part of verse 11 is made a separate paragraph because it does not fit the flow of the passage. It is as though the Lord is interrupting himself and asking for confirmation.

Verse 12 is not only made a new paragraph, but the contrasting “you” is repeated to help strengthen the relationship back to the end of verse 8 and the sharp change from verse 11. Verse 13 begins the promise of punishment and needs a paragraph because of that change alone. “So, then” relates the punishment to the discussion which has gone before.

Verses 14–16 are then handled as a poetic expansion of the imagery in 13. The final statement about the Lord as the source of the message is set off into a final paragraph as it is in many translations.

In neither of these two examples will the solution for translations in all languages and on all levels of language be the same. The point which I am trying to make is simply that in these instances we were able to get a clearer picture of some important aspects of the structure of the passage, to see why the passage was organized the way it was. Because of this it then became possible to look for translational solutions which not only left the clearer meaning of dynamic equivalence intact (or enhanced it) but also gave us a translation which was more nearly equivalent to the original in the impression of the design, the organization, which it conveyed to the reader. It seems to me that these examples strengthen the possibility that discourse analysis can lead to translations which are both more “dynamic” and more nearly “equivalent” than our typical efforts at the present time. In the forthcoming *A Translator’s Handbook on Amos* we are trying to take steps in the direction of helping the translator achieve such a result.