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RE-CREATING ISAIAH'S POETRY

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When I presented my paper "Translation as Re-creation" (*TBT* 1994, 129) at the UBS Victoria Falls triennial workshop, someone in the audience remarked: "If one were to apply this to the letter, one would have to conclude that of any source text only one translation is possible." I answered that that was true. In my paper I distinguished adapted translations from translations done as re-creation. To summarise:

In an adapted translation, a translator makes use of a filter through which the translation output passes. The filter may be children's linguistic capacity, in which case the result will be a children's translation where the filter has automatically retained all difficult words, expressions and grammatical constructions, and let only easy ones fall through its net. It may have adapted difficult biblical notions to become more digestible, more childlike. Or the filter could be liturgical need, in which case it will retain all the "lo and behold"s, all the "woe betide"s and other solemn-sounding but otherwise fairly meaningless key words that evoke the pillars of cathedrals and the incense of slow ritual. The filter could be a concern for the form of the source text: target language equivalents will be chosen that represent closely each word and expression of the original, often at the expense of target language naturalness and understandability. This effort will result in form-based translations of which so many are available. The filter could be a concern for the readers' willingness, or lack of it, to read anything that is not clear common language. One immediate result of such a filter could be that the Bible's poetry is rendered as prose, whether presented in continuous text or in short lines.

In translation as re-creation, a translator will not translate unless the meaning of the source text has become transparent to him (or her). It is an illustration of the old adage: "One cannot translate what one does not understand." However, the meaning of the source is complex. It is the sum total of the lexical, grammatical, discourse, poetic, implied, emotional etc. meaning that the author put in his words, and that is there for us to discover. We should speak of a meaning package. Unless this package is grasped, and the source text has come alive to the translator, he cannot translate what is there. Once the translator has grasped the full meaning of

the source text (often the last step in this process will be intuitive), then he will be able to say it anew in the target language. He will be able to re-create it in translating. There will be no adaptation: the aim, whether reached or not, is to have a perfect equivalent. The only constraint is that of the audience: it should correspond more or less to the original one, in this case, roughly the Israelites of Isaiah's time. Today's closest equivalent is probably the mass of committed Christians in our congregations.

Although it is true that the source texts were neither written, for example, for children, or with our highly culture-bound liturgical needs in mind (see above), nevertheless the effort made by filtering translators, who in a way manipulate the source texts following a preset program, remains valid and fully respectable, because without it, many readers would never come into contact with God's Word.

But such translation should be distinguished from re-creation, because when re-creating, the full linguistic potential of the target language has to be exploited (no filters!) to re-create the full scope of linguistic expression as found in the source. *Ideally* then such re-creation will be unique, because mathematically speaking only one receptor language text will approximate completely the source text original. *In practice* the ideal will never be reached, for various reasons: first, because the writer may not have total competence in, and control over, the source language, even if it is his/her mother tongue; secondly, because certain aspects of the source text's meaning may no longer be accessible, especially if the text is written in a dead or ancient language; and thirdly, because a translator's mind is not a computer that automatically hits on the right word or expression that re-creates the original most closely. Various options will be considered until, intuitively, the one that is thought to re-create the source best is retained. Another mind, that of another translator, maybe of another time or a different culture, may hit on another way of re-creating the source text. If these translators are honest, and if they understand the source text with near-native ability, all such re-creations will be acceptable.

But this is not the same as accepting as truly equivalent different translations where the difference is the result not of such careful analysis of the original meaning package, but of the use of a program filter that sets the tone if not the structure and even the wording of the translation. In translation as re-creation, it is the source text that fully determines the wording of the translation, not the needs of the readers.

In all this it is assumed that the methods of dynamic equivalence (or functional, or meaning-based equivalence) translation are put to use. Form-based (or literal) translation models are useful, especially for those who are unfamiliar with the biblical languages, but since they strictly follow the forms of the source texts, there is no way that the full original meaning can shine through them. The force, the imagery, the style, the implications etc. of the original text will run aground on awkward target language surface structures that try to copy those of the source. These will form a distraction to the readers, preventing them from coming into contact with the full meaning of the source, as placed there by the original author. In translation as re-creation, the methods of functional equivalence translation are fully put to use, but they are circumscribed, not by an intentional filter, but by the aim of producing a true re-creation of the source text. Translation as re-creation provides a framework within which functional equivalence translation can be practised.

Nice theory (maybe!) but what of the practice? several people have asked me. Show us some translated texts that demonstrate how this approach makes a difference! I will try to do so with a passage from Isaiah, using English as the target language.

Ground rules

Although the example below deals with the translation of Old Testament poetry, the principle of translation as re-creation will apply to the translation of prose also. But poetry will highlight the problems and possible solutions better. To evaluate some model translations against an effort of translation as re-creation, some simple ground rules have to be established, even if they cannot be absolute.

1. *The meaning package which the translation conveys must be the same as that conveyed by the source text.* That includes the fact that the general language level of the source must be reflected in the translation, and that the translation normally be expressive and concise if the original is. (This has been argued for above.)

2. *Hebrew parallelism should be integrated in the translation.* This means that the fundamental repeating rhythm of the source text is preserved; second lines normally expand or reinforce first lines while repeating or continuing their idea.

3. *In principle, source levels of explicitness must be respected.*

These rules cannot always be applied in practice. For example, for rule 1, there may be certain Hebrew expressions the meaning of which cannot be conveyed entirely in today's target languages, or the meaning of which may even be obscure. Also, there may be literary styles in the Hebrew (like the sermonising in poetic format in parts of Proverbs, or the political poetry in the prophetic writing) that do not exist in the target language. Stylistic adjustment will have to be made. But, for poetry, if the translation is wordy and reads like "fine-cut" prose, it should not be termed poetry in translation.

On rule 2, if attempting to render two parallel lines of the Hebrew results in two identical or near-identical lines in the translation, such lines may have to be collapsed. This may happen rarely since the lexicon of many modern target languages is as elaborate as that which has come to us in the Hebrew Bible, itself an incomplete reflection of the living language of the Israelites.

As for rule 3, playing with implicit versus explicit information is a powerful tool in the hands of translators who have to make sure their translation is acceptable to a particular audience, or is adapted to its needs. But modifying levels of explicitness when re-creating a source text is bound to affect matters such as flow and focus, if not lexical meaning itself. Making implicit information explicit, or vice versa, is a tool that has to be wielded cautiously indeed if a translator wants to translate by re-creating.

Isaiah 2.2e-3

In the following exercise, the Masoretic text of the above verses will be compared to its translation in several English versions: the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the Good News Bible (GNB), the Contemporary English Version (CEV), the Revised English Bible (REB), the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), the New International Version (NIV), and the New Century

Version (NCV). I will then provide my own attempt at re-creating Is 2.2e-3 in translation.

What is the immediate context of 2.2e-3? Isaiah has just said in the preceding lines that “in the latter days” (RSV) the mountain on which stands the house of the LORD will be set up as the highest of the mountains. What happens next is that:¹

MT:

wēnâhâru ‘elâw kol-
hagôyim
wēhâlku ‘amîm rabbîm,
wē’âmeru:

lêku, wēna’âleh ‘el-har
yhwh
‘el-bêt ‘êlôhê ya’âqôb
wëyôrênu midrâkâw
wēnêlkâh bê’ôrêchôtâw.
kî mîtsstÿôn têtê’ tôrah
udêbar-yhwh mîrushâlâyim.

and-shall-flow to-it all-nations
and-will-go peoples many, and-
say:
come, and-let-us-go-up to-the-
mount-of- YHWH
to-the-house-of the-God-of-Jacob
and-he-will-teach-us from-his-
ways
and-we-will-walk in-his-paths.
for out-of-Zion will-go-forth
the-law
and-YHWH’s-word from-Jerusalem

We will look at the versions one by one and compare certain features across all of them.

RSV:

and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

RSV has no serious problem with *lexical meaning*. As is to be expected of a form-based translation, the text is a close equivalent of the source. A point to be mentioned is “come” in line 2. The Hebrew verb does not mean “movement towards the speaker” but movement in general. (Some versions solve this particular problem with “come to it.”)

Style: the RSV does not translate the beautiful, flowing Hebrew language badly, but does offer some uncommon or stilted English which has no equivalent in the source: in order to render the unmarked future of the Hebrew, “will” is more appropriate than the now less common “shall” (twice); can “flow” easily be said of “nations”?; “that he/we may...” is old-fashioned; “go forth” is archaic (*yatsa*’ is not).

There is a problem of logical sequencing in the first lines: the people of the nations do not flow to Mount Zion and *then* say: “Let us go up to the mountain of the LORD.” Logically they will state their plans first and then execute them. By

1 The reader is encouraged to read the text in Hebrew even if he or she does not know the language well. The transcription has been simplified to enable students of Hebrew to read the text and appreciate its sound.

translating the preposition 'el in line 3 as "to", RSV creates a reverse timing hitch, which GNB avoids (see below).

The grammar of the penultimate line in RSV is heavy, albeit marginally acceptable in poetry. (Instead of "For out of Africa shall emerge a leader," one would prefer the smoother "For a leader shall emerge out of Africa," or: "For out of Africa a leader shall emerge.") But these two lines in RSV do preserve accurately the focus of the original: Zion/Jerusalem.

There is no need to reproduce all of NRSV since it is close to RSV. The first two lines are:

all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say,

"Stream" now replaces "flow," and "and" in both lines is dropped, which not only sounds less heavy in English, but in many cases is a useful way of dealing with Hebrew parallelism. (The *waw*-consecutive that links line 2 to line 1 is not really to be translated by the conjunction "and" which, in English, gives the impression that new meaning is going to follow. For lines to be parallel in meaning, in English, it is often better to have no explicit conjunction linking them.) In the last line, "the law" is replaced by "instruction," which exegetically is more correct here, but it sounds vague and unexpected: "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction...".

GNB:

Many nations will come streaming to it,

and their people will say,

"Let us go up the hill of the LORD,

to the Temple of Israel's God

He will teach us what he wants us to do;

we will walk in the paths he has chosen.

For the LORD's teaching comes from Jerusalem;

from Zion he speaks to his people."

Problems with *lexical meaning*: "Many nations" is problematic: the first line in the Hebrew has "all" (nations) which is also the meaning of the "many" (peoples) in the second line. "Hill" of the LORD (line 3) is unfortunate, since a hill can hardly be said to dominate all mountains. The words "he has chosen" (line 6) are not in the source text ("chosen," no doubt, is used to render "his" in "his paths"). "He speaks to his people" (line 8) is weak on two counts: the powerful image of "the word of the LORD," running through the whole Bible, and climaxing in Jn 1.1, is replaced by a prosaic equivalent. "To his people" is not what the text says: the receptors of the LORD's law/word are not identified. It could be the nations streaming to Jerusalem, it could be all people on earth. The expression "[the LORD's] people" has an ambiguous ring to it. As for the quotation marks: most translations and commentators do not include the last two lines as coming from the mouths of the people streaming to Jerusalem. GNB is consistent, however, in the way it places the emphasis in these lines on the LORD's teaching, thereby continuing the focus of the speech of the people on their way to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, in the Hebrew the main topic of the last two lines is the place where the law comes from: Jerusalem, not the law itself. "The LORD's teaching" is better than "instruction" (NRSV as well as REB below) to render torah in this line.

Style: general problems include a prose-like approach to the text (“what he wants us to do,” “he speaks to his people”). Several lines could probably be termed “line-cut prose.” However, we note that GNB has done away with the awkwardness of a reverse timing hitch by translating the preposition ‘*el* not as (direction) “to” but as an indicator of the act of climbing the mountain. (Examples of this use of ‘*el*: Ex 24.15, 18). The sequence now is logical: the nations go into motion and move towards the foot of Mount Zion; once they get there they say: “Let us (now) go up the mountain...”. GNB also maintains the *rhythm* of the Hebrew parallelism, as well as the reference to Zion, in parallel to the better-known Jerusalem, though it drops “Jacob,” opting for its synonym “Israel.” This may not be necessary: poetry may challenge the reader. Also on the positive side, “streaming” goes better than “flow” (RSV) when said of nations.

CEV:

... every nation will rush to it.
 Many people will come and say,
 “Let’s go to the mountain of the LORD God of Jacob
 and worship in his temple.”
 The LORD will teach us his Law from Jerusalem,
 and we will obey him.

Lexical meaning and other problems: “rush” is not the same thing as “flow/stream”; the idea of going “up” to the LORD’s mountain and house is left implicit; the proposed idea of “worship” is not explicit in the source text. (The context rather indicates that the people want to be taught.) “Zion” and “the word of the LORD” are not translated. “And we will obey him” is probably equivalent to “walk in his paths”, but it is in the “wrong” couplet. One could also criticise its logical connection to the preceding line: the source says that the LORD will teach us his “ways/Law” (collapsed in CEV), *in order for us to walk in his paths*. One could argue, however, that “we will” do it (walk in his paths/obey him) is implied. The reverse timing hitch is not resolved, and the focus of the last lines is not on the place where the Law will come from. Placing a blank line, however, after the speech of the people shows well that the speech is ended. (But then isn’t “and we will obey him” part of that speech?)

Parallelism: the ground rule that seems to be broken most is that of integrating the parallelism of the eight lines of the Hebrew. The parallel structure of the source disappears almost entirely in the translation of the last four lines. The last two lines in the Hebrew are well known, not least (for those who read Hebrew) because of their beautiful sound pattern. This concession to clarity and conciseness could be the result of some powerful program filter the translator applied.

Language: the lines generally appear to have a prosaic ring to them, making them sound like “line-cut” prose.

REB:

All the nations will stream towards it,
 and many peoples will go and say:
 “Let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
 to the house of the God of Jacob,
 that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.”

For instruction comes from Zion,

and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

This translation is comparable to that of RSV. There is improvement in English language use, with “stream” instead of “flow,” “will” instead of “shall”; but the reverse timing hitch is kept in the first lines, as are the old-fashioned “that he may” and “that we may.” “Instruction” seems better integrated in the grammar of the penultimate line than in NRSV (see above), but still sounds too technical. Finally, the emphasis in the last two lines in Hebrew should be on the place (Zion/Jerusalem) and not on “instruction/word.”

NJB is similar in many ways. There are some improvements. “Then” at the beginning; “go” in the second line is now “come to it.” “Come” is kept at the beginning of line 3, which makes the speech livelier. The sixth line has a good logical connection to line 5: “so that we...”; but the reverse timing hitch is kept in the first lines, and the emphasis in the last couplet is put on “Law” and “word” rather than on the place where these two issue from.

NIV:

and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,

to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,

so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion,

the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

“All nations” is smoother than “all the nations”; “that he may” and “that we may” is better rendered (including logical connectors) by “He will...” and “so that we...”; but the reverse timing hitch is there, and the emphasis in the last lines is not correct.

NCV:

and people from all nations will come streaming to it.

Many nations will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,

to the Temple of the God of Jacob.

Then God will teach us his ways,

and we will obey his teachings.”

His teachings will go out from Jerusalem;

the message of the LORD will go out from Jerusalem.

Style: there is quite a bit of repetition here, which may weigh on the reader: “nations” (twice); “come” (twice); “teach” and “teachings” (three times) and, especially, “Jerusalem” (twice). “Obey his teachings” is nearly equivalent to “walk in his paths,” but more prosaic. The same can be said for “message” versus “word.” On the positive side, the “shall”s have gone, and the penultimate couplet has good logical connectors. But the reverse timing hitch at the beginning is kept, and there is the wrong focus in the last two lines.

Can the author do better?

Probably not, but to be fair, after criticising others, I will offer a translation, leaving it to others to improve on it.

This is how I would re-create the Hebrew text of Is 2.2e-3:

All nations shall stream to it.

Their people came and said:

“Let us go up the Mountain of the LORD,
the LORD God of Jacob;

Let us go up to his holy temple.

Then he can teach us his ways
and we can walk in his paths.”

Because Jerusalem is where the Law comes from,

Indeed, the LORD’s word comes from Zion.

Conclusion

To paraphrase and adapt the words of a colleague: “If the principle of translation as re-creation is understood, not one verse of the Bible will escape.” The result of focussing primarily on the text and its full meaning, and not on the readers and their needs will be a new translation, different from those that are available at present.

ERNST R. WENDLAND

FIVE KEY ASPECTS OF STYLE IN JONAH AND (POSSIBLY) HOW TO TRANSLATE THEM

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Why Jonah may be more difficult to translate than it first appears

A number of recent studies have shown that there is more than meets the eye (or ear) in the case of the little book of Jonah. The *style*, or manner of writing, appears quite simple, but it is actually rather complex beneath the surface. Thus a careful reading reveals that the text as a whole features many symmetrically organized structural patterns. They are constructed by means of various carefully chosen similarities and contrasts with respect to both form and meaning. The stylistic techniques of lexical repetition and variation are especially prominent in the formation of these larger compositional arrangements, which are both linear and chiasmic in nature (see example below). The book also features a great deal of irony and enigma in its narrative development, both of which function to raise certain questions in the minds of attentive listeners as to what is actually being said, and meant. The use of such devices naturally makes the interpretation of Jonah considerably more complicated than the fast-moving and dramatic account of his exciting adventures would initially indicate.

Such common narrative techniques as repetition, variation, structure, irony, and enigma suggest that the original author prepared this work with a larger *rhetorical* purpose in mind. In other words, he used the art and skill of literary composition in the service of theological persuasion. His goal was to convince his