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## LET'S MAKE OUR TRANSLATIONS MORE INTERESTING

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Before translating a passage, how often have those of you who are translators asked yourselves, "What kind of style should I use here?" If you are like most of us who are involved in translation, the probable honest answer would be, "Not very often". Most translators who have had United Bible Societies training make sincere efforts to express the meaning of the original text in as natural a way as possible in their own language, and as a result we are seeing a rapid rise in the quality of Bible translations around the world. But it is not enough merely to ensure that the translation is expressed naturally. Translators should also make a real effort to employ a variety of styles as the text might suggest them. Some of the words of Christ were spoken in love with feeling and compassion, others were harsh, biting criticism. In his letters we see Paul defending himself against criticism, prodding his wandering young churches, arguing theology with vigor. We read the lyrical poetry of the Psalms and Job, the visions of Daniel and Ezekiel, along with the history and the stories of the Old Testament. Surely the Bible is full of different styles, and yet most of the translations have used very similar styles right throughout the Bible.

There are several reasons for this. For one thing, most translators are not experienced writers in their own language. Whereas most translation teams have people who have biblical training, there are few teams with experienced writers. This is because we see the need to have people as translators who have an understanding of the background and message of the Bible, and we give priority to such people on a translation team. Further, in most languages without a long history of literacy and writing there are very few trained writers who could serve on a translation team. Perhaps another reason is that the United Bible Societies (rightly, I believe) has been concentrating its teaching efforts on techniques of analysis and transfer so that translations will convey the meaning of the text clearly to average readers, and therefore of necessity techniques of restructuring and style have been somewhat neglected. Perhaps now, however, many translators should begin to study how to become better writers.

"But", you might object, "good writing is a creative type of thing. You cannot teach creativity." Perhaps not, but if translators can be made aware of some of the methods involved in good writing, they can do a great deal to make their translations have variety, and hold the interest of their readers.

In *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (called simply TAPOT here) Nida and Taber have outlined some matters of style and methods for training stylists (Chapter 7 of TAPOT, in particular pp. 159ff.). This section of the book deserves rereading by those who wish to improve their own writing ability. Recently, at two different Translators' Institutes sponsored by the United Bible Societies (Ibadan, Nigeria, April 1971, and Bangalore, India,

May 1971) the participants were assigned a series of writing exercises based on the suggestions in TAPOT. The results may serve to illustrate types of features involved in different kinds of styles.

The participants at the Ibadan Translators' Institute were asked to write for the author a straightforward account of their trip from home to Ibadan. Then they were asked to tell the same story for the elders back in their villages. They then wrote a third version of the account of their trip to a friend so as to amuse him, and finally a fourth so as to grieve this friend. The approach was varied somewhat at the Bangalore Translators' Institute. The translators first wrote an account of a bus trip which they all took to Mysore for one day. They then wrote it to a five-year-old child, then to the older people back home. The fourth and fifth versions were written to a friend who did not go on the trip, but in one case the account was written to make him wish he had gone, and in the other to make him glad he had stayed behind. The translators were allowed to write the accounts in English or in their own languages, but if the latter, they were requested to give a word-for-word translation into English as well.

The results of these exercises were surprisingly similar in Nigeria and in India. That is, many of the same characteristics of style showed up in the Nigerian and Indian writing. However, because there was more time to work on these exercises in India than in Nigeria, the accounts from there were longer, and we were able to spend more time discussing the various features of style that were used by the participants. Therefore, the comments below are based more on these accounts given by the Bangalore translators than on those from Ibadan.

### Account 1

This was a narrative written as if I were to be the only reader. The facts were told in a plain manner with few extra details; few words were used which showed the emotion of the writers. The writers assumed I already knew what had happened, and were not aiming to make me feel a certain way. Therefore, as you might expect, these accounts were for the most part pretty boring. How about your translations? Apart from the interest generated by the actual content of the texts being translated, is there anything in the translation to hold the interest of the reader? Anything to make him sit up and take notice?

### Account 2

This was the story written for a five-year-old child, and it was interesting mainly because the writers used more of a conversational style. They seemed to be speaking directly to the child with questions such as, "Have you ever seen an elephant?" or, "You see?" or with statements such as, "There, right on top of the hill . . ." Another feature of these accounts was the way events were expanded, objects and actions were pictured. For example, to describe buying coconuts one participant wrote, "If you gave the man some paise<sup>1</sup> he gave you some coconuts." The zoo was generally described as a

<sup>1</sup> One hundred paise equals 1 Rupee in India.

big garden where there were animals. The writers used simple words when writing for five-year-olds, employing adjectives such as: *big, nice, huge, pretty*. They tended towards generalities rather than details when describing the things we did that day (for example visiting the summer home of Tipu Sultan), but were careful to mention things they thought children would be interested in. Almost all the writers wrote that we stopped by the toy stores, for example, and also that there were many children at the zoo, many of them playing on swings and slides. They also listed the animals we saw there.

When describing things they had seen to a child, the writers usually compared the unfamiliar objects to familiar ones. They used sentences like, "The streets were like at home, but were wider and had more cars in them." Other examples were the descriptions of animals where a giraffe was said to be "an animal higher than the roof", an elephant was "an animal much bigger than a water buffalo", and so on.

Another feature of style was seen in the types of sentences used. The writers were all careful to use short, simple sentences when writing for children.

### Account 3

This was the story written for the older people back home. The first thing that struck me when I read this set of accounts was that they were much longer than those written for children. The main reasons for this were the wealth of descriptions employed by the writers and the attention to details that were lacking from the first two accounts. Brindavan Gardens, mentioned in Account 1 as "a garden of fountains and lights", was now vividly described: "lights" became "multi-colored lights"; "many people" became "crowds of people pushing and rushing". The toys mentioned in Account 2 were described in this set of accounts as "cheap wooden toys". In this set of accounts the writers mentioned that we were 80 people who went on the trip (not just "a lot" as in Account 2), and that Mysore was 90 miles away.

Many of the generalities of the accounts in 2 were made specific now, so that the grave of "a Maharajah" in No. 2 was now mentioned to be that of Tipu Sultan. "One day" of accounts 1 and 2 became "last Sunday". Again there were frequent references to familiar things back home, and Mysore was described in terms of its similarities and differences to the home towns of the writers.

### Account 4

This story was for a friend who had not come, and was written so as to make him wish he had. In addition to the things mentioned in No. 3, another striking feature of style in this set of accounts was that words were used which have strong favorable values. The personal feelings of the writer were seen clearly, and as a result these accounts were generally interesting to read. The coconut milk was said to be "very tasty", Mysore was said to be "a beautiful city, neat and clean". The buses were "comfortable", the places we visited were "historic and significant". The trip was "a nice experience", Brindavan Gardens were "famous" and "worth seeing".

In addition to using such words the writers drew attention to various interesting events of the day such as the fact that they sang songs in the bus, that they ate good meals, and so on.

### Account 5

This account was for a friend who did not come on the trip, but was to be written in such a way as to make him glad he stayed home. The features of style in this set of accounts were generally the same as those in set 4, but words with unfavorable feelings were used. In this set the trip was "boring, tedious, uninspiring", the buses were "shaky and noisy", the roads were "rough", the lights at Brindavan were "artificial", breakfast was "hurried". Unfavorable events were listed, such as a delay in starting, the small accident with the bus, the heat, the late lunch, and the late hour of return.

Further, many participants interpreted many of the things we had seen. They mentioned the waste of the empty palace in a poverty-stricken area, for example, and the death of independent spirit in India as shown by the British victory over Tipu Sultan.

Of course, translators cannot put their own personal feelings in the translation, but they should certainly use features of style to bring out the feeling content of the original, and should use language so as to maintain a high level of interest on the part of the readers of the translation. What kinds of stylistic features can be used? Several can be seen in the five sets of accounts outlined above.

1. Words which have emotive or feeling value can often be used. This is particularly true of adjectives, but also of nouns and verbs. Be aware of sets of words which have similar meanings, and see if there will not be occasion to use some word which has more "life" to it than another, one which is more descriptive than another. "Big" can be a very boring adjective in English. "Huge, gigantic, enormous, large"—in many cases in translation one of these would be acceptable in place of "big", and perhaps would be more colorful.

Further, we saw in sets 4 and 5 that words can have either positive or negative emotive values. Therefore, in translation it would be well to examine a passage to see what feeling impact it had on the first readers. Did it make them feel secure, angry, happy? Your translation should reflect this. Look at the reported conversations in the Bible, such as the words of Christ or other narratives. Were the words addressed in love to friends, or in anger to opponents or enemies? Were they orders to a servant, or were they the words of a servant pleading with his master? Alert translators have a golden opportunity to make their translations live by employing words which suit the emotion of a passage.

2. The way a translator handles descriptions of unfamiliar things in a people's life can help or hinder the understandability of a text and also make it less or more interesting. In the accounts outlined above the writers often compared unknown items with known ones. If your readers were unfamiliar with sheep but knew deer, then it might be possible to describe

sheep as "domestic animal like a deer". (See *Form and Meaning in Translation* by Jacob A. Loewen, *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 22 No. 4, October 1971, pp. 169-175, for an excellent discussion of how to handle various cultural items.)

3. Another lesson for translators from these five accounts is that we see that the same events will be described somewhat differently for different kinds of people. The contrast in the accounts written for the writer who was familiar with the trip to Mysore (account 1) and in those written for people back home (accounts 3, 4 and 5), was startling. Most translators have good knowledge of the stories, events and background of the Bible. There is sometimes a tendency to forget that many readers, even Christian readers, will not have the same familiarity with the Bible, and as a result many translations do not give as complete a description of items as they should. One translation in an area where there were no sheep had translated "sheep" as "animal called sheep", when "domestic animal called sheep" or even "domestic animal like a deer called sheep" would have made the translation more interesting as well as more meaningful.

Of course, a translator is restricted by a given text, and he cannot add masses of details to the translation to explain all the facts and events there. He must always be sure that he is doing no more than making clear in his language things that were equally clear to the original readers. But there are many features of style in the Bible which produced an emotional reaction on the original readers, features which held the interest of those readers, and translators should try to reflect these in translation.

#### **La Traduction: théorie et méthode**

The United Bible Societies are happy to announce the publication of the French version of *Theory and Practice of Translation* by Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber. As is indicated in the preface, certain modifications have been made as a result of the teaching of the contents of this volume to numerous translators around the world. This has mainly to do with the order of the presentation of certain subjects.

This book, printed at La Concorde Press in Lausanne, Switzerland, is available in paperback only and the cost is \$5.00 or £2.00. Translators in French-speaking areas should apply to their translations consultant for copies of this UBS Help for Translators.