

Greek text in form, the 1966 translation is much closer to the Greek in content. What is remarkable is that the very expressions in the 1933 Tagalog translation which are the more nearly equivalent to the Greek text in form are the ones which are the less equivalent to the Greek text in content. On the other hand, many of the expressions in the 1966 Tagalog translation which are more different in form were found to be closer to the content of the Greek text than the corresponding formal equivalents used in the 1933 translation. *It may be concluded, therefore, that a translation which corresponds very closely in form to the original does not correspond in meaning as well as a translation which expresses the meaning in a form quite different from that of the original.*

(to be continued)

G. HENRY WATERMAN

MICHAEL TRINKLEIN

LUTHER'S INSIGHTS INTO THE TRANSLATOR'S TASK

The Rev. Michael Trinklein is a Professor in the Concordia Theological Seminary in Hong Kong.

(See H. Wilbur Aulie's book review on p. 100.)

Introduction

There is an Italian proverb which says "*Traduttore traditore*". The phrase points up what most authors feel about the efforts of translators to render their original works into another language: "The translator is a traitor."¹

Naturally, there is a degree of exaggeration in this; however, any translator who has attempted to take a piece of writing and express thoughts, spirit and "personality"—the life and breath of the writer's soul—via a completely different language has experienced the frustrating feeling that, try as he will, he cannot capture and express everything which the author originally intended. The subtle connotations of strong and weak words, the alliterative play on words, the catchy juxtaposition of matching phrases, the scholarly pun—these are some of the stylistic elements which go towards making a living piece of writing. Unfortunately, though, these are the very things that test and defy the translator's art most severely. The result is that something is

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The English Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. x.

changed; the "punch" of the original is all too often diluted, if captured at all. It is precisely this phenomenon which is the basis for the English expression: "it loses something in the translation."

This general problem becomes even more acute when the translator becomes an overtly active or passive traitor. He becomes an active traitor when he introduces into the translation his own specific ideas, beliefs, practices and prejudices. The unfortunate thing is that this brand of traitorous translation exists even among honest men; very often the expression of their prejudices and preferences occurs at the subconscious level. Conscious prejudices and preferences can be guarded against and allowances can be made for them, but a translator is helpless to counteract the influence of his subconscious. That is why a translation by a group will generally be more accurate; these subconscious prejudices can be spotted by others and eliminated.

Passive treachery occurs at the other end of the translators' spectrum. In order to avoid any accusation of prejudicial or biased translation, this brand of traitorous translator is strong on translating the words. Translation thus becomes mechanical, the substitution of the dictionary meaning of a word in one language for that of another. Unfortunately, this leaves a lot to be desired when the translation (if it can be called that) is read.

Luther and Languages

The problem of translating both faithfully and meaningfully is ageless. Moreover, it assumes a greater relevancy at any age and at any point where two dissimilar and disparate cultures touch, cross and intermingle, such as in Hong Kong where exactly this unique blend of East and West takes place. It may be that through Luther's experiences, some light can be shed on common problems so that today's translators can recognize, evaluate and cope with them better.

However, there is a practical concern which calls for attention in this connection, and which needs to be mentioned in order to help retain a proper perspective on what translators can learn from Luther. This is the practical aspect of linguistic relationships. The languages of the Old and New Testaments, though Middle Eastern in origin, would have to be described as falling more into the linguistic framework of the Western world. Luther worked with the German language. With its word endings, case endings, grammar and syntax, German is not so far removed from Hebrew and Greek. English, also, is part of this broad family of languages which has a common grammatical philosophy as base. It is true that there are many differences between Hebrew, German, Greek, Latin and English. However, the philosophy of language structure and word relationships seems to find more common ground than not.

Chinese, though, is definitely a language of the East. There is a different philosophy of word relationships, structure, construction and the like. No advanced degree in linguistics is needed to observe the patent fact that it is decidedly easier to translate New Testament Greek into English, than it is to translate the Greek into Chinese. The Chinese word order and grammatical construction are just not as related to Greek as is English.

Thus, Luther's comments and insights dealt with languages having a linguistic relationship much closer than that between Chinese and English. However, keeping this in mind, these insights can still have value, for they revolve less about grammatical concepts than about the actual communication of meaning.

Luther's Contribution

The problems, though, do not all belong to this age alone. Luther had his problem too. His was the problem of translating the Bible into a language that had no standard dialect. Luther's German Bible formed the substance and standard of the German language only *after* the appearance and acceptance of his translation. So Luther's task was even more onerous than at first appears, for he not only had to decide what a Hebrew or Greek word means in German, but also which of the many and various expressions and usages of the word would communicate the meaning best, as well as being the best possible German rendering. Perhaps this factor explains his insistence on clarity of meaning, and on finding the best possible equivalent word when discussing translation in his writing. Thus in *On Translating: An Open Letter*, he said:

“. . . it has often happened that for two or three or four weeks we have searched and enquired for a single word and sometimes not found it even then.

“In translating Job, Master Philip (Philip Melanchthon), Aurogallus (one of Luther's assistants) and I laboured so that sometimes we scarcely handled three lines in four days.”²

It is not within the scope of this study to present a detailed history of the development of Luther's German Bible. In brief, the first edition of the New Testament was published in 1522, also known as the September-testament. The Psalms were published in 1531, and the whole Bible in 1534. Revisions were published in the years following, almost up to Luther's death.

However, what does concern us is what can be learned from Luther's process of translation. What concerns did he have which can help focus and direct the labours of translating, so that clearer goals can be established, and achieved more accurately? Above all, can we learn something for ourselves from his wholehearted dedication to his Lord Jesus Christ, and the great outpourings of energy and accomplishments which marked his ministry?

Qualifications for Translators

As a general beginning, it is possible to make some broad observations on the basis of this study about what kind of requirements or qualifications are necessary in order to be a translator.

1. *Personality*. The first one is something which translators have little control over: the personality of the translator. This is shaped by heredity, by environment, and by childhood training. Luther embodied the buoyancy

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1969), p. 188.

of spirit, the positive assurance of trust and confidence in God's grace, the zest and effervescent joy of being a redeemed and forgiven child of God, and the unhesitating but always humble submission to the will and direction of God. These are the personality traits that shine forth in his translation. In fact, it is just these highly individual and personal characteristics that distinguish Luther's Bible over against other famous translations.

All translators may not be blessed with such a personality as Luther's. However, all have some kind of personality, though it seems that some translators consider themselves to be like machines. They think they are not allowed to express their feelings; they give the impression of being a language computer. The one language comes from the page to the brain via the eye; and the other language comes out from the brain to the next page via the arm and pencil.

Luther would not agree with this. He would probably ask: "Why do you deny your own nature in the work of translation, but allow your personality to show through in all other areas of your life?" To get an idea of what is meant: if five people were suddenly asked to give a simultaneous translation of a speech, each would translate the words a different way, with different emphases. Why? Because of the different personalities concerned. However, when mulling over a speech with pencil and paper afterwards, each carefully manages to remove every trace of himself which can be found. The translations would become more and more similar. Unfortunately, what often happens at that point is that the lack of personality removes the interest and the readability of the translation as well.

2. *A thorough grounding in the original languages.* This is an obvious qualification and one which Luther takes almost for granted. In one of his table-talks he speaks of the necessity for understanding the grammar and meaning of the original text, so that one can be sure one's translation is correct. The necessity for this foundation is self-evident.

3. *Proper attitudes.* Luther felt that the task of translating the Scriptures demanded the definite attitude of Christian conviction. In *On Translating: An Open Letter*, Luther wrote:

"Ah, translating is not everyman's skill as the mad saints imagine. It requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, Godfearing, Christian, trained, informed and experienced heart. Therefore I hold that no false Christian or factious spirit can be a decent translator."³

4. *Continuous review of his work.* Another characteristic which Bluhm ascribes to Luther is that of persistent repetition and review of his work. By expressing a section of Scripture a number of different ways at various times, Luther developed a great familiarity with the material of the text and its potential for translation. In other words, in many cases he could come up with an excellent translation because he had tried so many previous attempts on "for size", eventually picking the one which "fitted" the best.⁴

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 194.

⁴ Luther, Vol. 35, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

5. *Satisfaction with work done.* Luther, being the kind of person that he was, would also probably say that a translator must be happy about what he has done, and feel that he has done a good job. As recorded in another of his table-talks:

“This German Bible (this is not praise for myself but the work praises itself) is so good and precious that it is better than all other versions, Greek or Latin, and one can find more in it than in all commentaries . . .”⁵

This pride in his work was important, if for nothing else, for maintaining his wry—but caustic—sense of humour in the face of the sharp attacks on his translations by the critics. This was brought out in one of Plass’s accounts where Luther was talking about his critics and said:

“I well know—and they know less than the miller’s beast—how much ability, industry, reason and understanding are required to make a good translator. They have never tried it. A current saying says: ‘Whoever builds along the road has many masters.’ This is happening to me too. Those who have never been able to speak correctly, to say nothing of translating, are now my masters, one and all of them, and I must be the pupil of them all.”⁶

When it comes to translators and their critics, a paraphrase of a line from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Pirates of Penzance* might be quite appropriate: “A translator’s lot is not a happy one . . .” One of the stranger inclinations of mankind is that after a translation is finished, all who have read it immediately become experts in translation, and consider the translator as fair game for whatever criticism comes to mind, deserved or not. The furor that greeted the publication of the Revised Standard Version in the late 1940s and early 1950s is a case in point.

The translator thus must not be impervious to criticism, nor treat it too lightly. He is, after all, capable of mistakes. However, uninformed criticism can best be coped with by a strong inner assurance that one has done one’s job well, and a sense of humour to keep the slings and arrows of such outraged critics within the harmful, but not fatal, distance of perspective.

6. *Luck.* Luck is that elusive spirit or power that sometimes enables one to do some piece of work exceedingly well and with complete satisfaction, even though the efforts were no more intense or inspired than with other less successful attempts. As Luther said:

“For I have found in my translating that it takes luck to make a precise rendering even when the original is perfectly clear and certain.”⁷

The practical approach

The mark of a translator’s work, though, does not depend just on the number of necessary qualifications which may be present. How does the

⁵ Luther, Vol. 54, *op. cit.*, p. 408.

⁶ Ewald M. Plass, editor, *What Luther Says*, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 108.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 276.

translator work? What is he trying to achieve? What are his criteria? How well has he done his task? These are questions which move the focus of this study from the theoretical to the practical level.

When Luther's writings are viewed from the point of view of the practical implications and applications of the translator's arts and skill, some interesting facts emerge.

1. *Some Informal Principles.* In one of his table-talks of 1532, he mentioned that there were two rules for translating the Bible when dealing with obscure or difficult parts. The first one was the law and the gospel. He said of translating such a passage:

"I consider whether it treats of grace or law, whether wrath or the forgiveness of sin, and with which of these it agrees better. By this procedure I have often understood the most obscure passages. Either the law or the gospel has made them meaningful, for God divides his teaching into law and gospel."⁸

The second rule was, simply, to consult an expert. He wrote:

". . . I ask those who have a better knowledge than I have whether the Hebrew words can bear this or that sense which seems to me to be especially fitting. And that is most fitting which is closest to the argument of the book."⁹

However, in 1542, in another table-talk, Luther mentioned three completely different rules. The first concerned his theory that all Scripture could naturally be divided into three spheres: the household, the government, the church. Thus, a verse would be best fitted to one or the other sphere. Secondly, when dealing with equivocal words or constructions, use the one which best agrees with the New Testament. The third rule was simply that of the analogy of faith, namely, that a sentence cannot be in conflict with the whole message of the Bible.

It is evident that such rules, guidelines and standards are rather vague and general. But they are taken from casual table conversations, and thus are not to be taken so seriously as the measured thoughts which are produced after careful meditation and deliberation.

2. *Responsible freedom.* Then, one must ask, what were Luther's guiding principles? These can be arrived at from *On Translating: An Open Letter* and *Defence of the Translation of the Psalms*. Bluhm analyzes them concisely as follows:

"Luther's procedure as a translator is clear. First he establishes, to the best of his ability and upon his conscience, the meaning of the text before him. Then he tries hard to find the most suitable, idiomatic German garb for it . . . The text is king, the translation only a humble but faithful handmaiden bent upon serving her master. But this handmaiden insists on the privilege of talking in her own idiom."¹⁰

⁸ Luther, Vol. 54, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰ Bluhm, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

To borrow again from Bluhm, an expression which best describes Luther's approach to the task of translating the Bible is "responsible freedom". Once the scientific process of establishing the meaning of the text is complete, then the artistic and creative process begins. This art of translating, Luther felt, was a secret best understood by the idea of freedom. This is the *sine qua non* of meaningful translations.

The difficult part, though, is justifying the degree of freedom which one takes in translating. At times Luther left the text altogether and expressed the meaning of the passage in his own words. Sometimes words were added which were not in the original. However, this was not irresponsible, but responsible freedom, for it was intended to present the real meaning of the original text. At other times, though, Luther felt that responsible freedom required a very literal rendering of the text. He was willing to adopt such a contradictory principle when a fundamental point of theology was involved.

3. *The priority of theology.* It is here that the ultimate and pervasive principles guiding Luther become evident. His ultimate standards and highest values were not aesthetic or literary, but theological and religious. Whenever there was a clash between theology and idiom, theology—the Word of God—took first place.

4. *Intelligibility.* In reviewing again Luther's exercise of the principle of responsible freedom, one can arrive at the basic criterion of his approach towards an object of the work of translation. This was the desire to make his translation perfectly clear and intelligible to the reader. Naturally, the criterion of theology had to be met first, but after that came intelligibility. Lehman, in his *Introduction to Luther's Defence of the Translation of the Psalms*, summarizes Luther's feelings about the translator's task as outlined in his essay. He writes:

"Very simply, the task of the translator is not that of reproducing in one language words exactly equivalent to the words of another language, but of reproducing in vigorous vernacular idiom the meaning originally expressed in the foreign tongue . . . Ultimately, the sense itself in the original must determine whether the rendering in translation will be literal or relatively free."¹¹

This desire of Luther to present his readers with an idiomatic rendering of the text which was clear and understandable characterized almost every statement and opinion he made about the subject of translations. Again and again he stated this as his aim. One example is in his *Defence of the Translation of the Psalms*, where he wrote:

"For we followed the rule that wherever the words could have given or tolerated an improved meaning, there we did not allow ourselves to be forced by the artificial Hebrew of the rabbis into accepting a different inferior meaning. For this is what all schoolmasters teach, that words are to serve and follow the meaning, and not the meaning the words . . .

¹¹ Luther, Vol. 35, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

But what is the point of needlessly adhering so scrupulously and stubbornly to words which one cannot understand anyway? Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather, he must see to it—once he understands the Hebrew author—that he concentrates on the sense of the text, asking himself, Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation? Once he has the German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words, and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows.”¹²

Furthermore, Luther followed this principle almost from the very beginning of his career. His very first effort at Bible translation, the Pericope of St. Peter's and St. Paul's day (Matt. 16: 13–19) in 1519, was by no means a literal translation. There was both expansion and condensation of the text. As Bluhm explains it:

“The chief reason for this phenomenon . . . may have been Luther's striving, conscious or unconscious or both, to present his hearers and readers with as clear and idiomatic a German version as possible.”¹³

For Luther, “clear and idiomatic” German had its own criterion: the living language of daily life. This living language was found in the house, the market place and the shop, as used by the common man. The style, the idiom, the grammar—all was couched in the language of the people. Thus, when discussing Luther's translation of the New Testament, Bluhm comments that it

“ . . . is such superbly idiomatic German that it approximates original German. The achievement of this goal was one of the main criteria Luther set for himself to judge his success as a translator. He had succeeded in his own eyes when his readers did not stumble or shake their heads but read on as if they were reading a master of German prose, which they indeed were.”¹⁴

It seems to me that this is the message from Luther for translators today. Translators must try for responsible freedom, together with a desire to make the translation read like the ordinary idiomatic speech of the ordinary person. This is particularly difficult in the case of translating something into Chinese. The many thousands of years of Chinese history, culture and language cannot help but affect the translator. In his searching for words and phrases he is automatically led, as it were, to the vast numbers of literary expressions which abound in the philosophical, cultural and historical works of China.

Furthermore, it is almost a rule of thumb that the more educated a person is in Chinese, the more he knows—and uses—these scholarly but obscure phrases, words, expressions and characters. This is in spite of the fact that these renderings are generally unknown to the average reader. The result is a masterpiece of classical Chinese, but a masterpiece which is extremely difficult to read. I have always found it hard to understand why Chinese

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

¹³ Bluhm, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

writers strive to write like Mencius or Tao Tze, when they themselves cannot read and understand these writers without the aid of commentaries or some kind of help. The last fifty years have seen great changes in this area; but more are still needed.

5. *The principle of equivalent effect.* One can understand and apply Luther's principle of intelligibility more clearly if it is explained on the basis of the principle of equivalent effect. This is described by Dr. E. V. Rieu as "the lodestar of the translator's art".¹⁵ This means that a particular translation is the best when it comes nearest to giving its readers the same effect as the original first gave to its readers.

With this principle, one can understand why Luther could range, with his sense of responsible freedom, from occasionally being very literal when the subject was a fundamental doctrine, to occasionally becoming very free, sometimes to the point of inserting a word which was not in the original if he thought it helped convey the emphasis of the original meaning. An example of this is the insertion of "alone" into Rom. 3: 28. One can also understand why he emphasized the need for the idiomatic use of the living language. These two emphases can both be justified—even required—on the basis of this principle of equivalent effect. Luther wanted his readers to feel what the people of the Old and the New Testaments must have felt when they first read God's inspired word.

This is surely what translators today also seek to achieve.

Conclusion

So, the secret of Luther's translations was the freedom with which he moved in handling the original text. Coupled with this freedom was the linguistic art of conveying the meaning of the original in the idiomatic—but proper—language of his day. Perhaps the person today who best shares this secret is J. B. Phillips. While making this study, I came upon Phillips' criteria which he had established for himself before starting his work of translation of the Epistles. I felt that these criteria fit Luther's principles completely. They were as follows:

The language used must be that commonly spoken;

The translation should expand, if necessary, to preserve the original meaning;

The translation should "flow";

The value of the version should lie in its "easy-to-read" quality.

In any effort in establishing normative criteria, these principles have value for all translators, as they had for Luther.

MICHAEL TRINKLEIN

¹⁵ E. H. Robertson, *The New Translations of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1959), p. 123.