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## PRONOMINAL THEOLOGY IN TRANSLATING THE GOSPELS

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In many of the languages into which the NT is being translated or re-translated today, a grammatical distinction is made between the so-called T and V pronouns (and) of 2nd person address. This applies also to the corresponding verbal and affixed forms. The difference in social connotation signaled by these pronouns can be expressed simply in terms of two main contrasting features:

- a) the V-form (from French *vous*) signals inequality or distance between the speaker and addressee in terms of social hierarchy or power. Thus it is the form used for polite address. The T-form (from French *tu*) indicates social/power equality.
- b) the V-form signals personal distance (unfamiliarity or coldness), while the T-form indicates greater closeness (familiarity or intimacy) between speaker and addressee.

Languages which make this specific distinction are numerous and widespread. They include Indo-European languages and Turkic languages. In some languages, the distinction is limited to different forms for addressing individuals, while in others there also exist separate T- and V-forms for addressing groups of people. In the Greek text of the NT, however, there is only one 2nd person singular pronoun, *su*, that fulfills all of these functions for the singular address, whereas the pronoun *humeis* does the same for the true plural address. In other words, there is no distinction between T- and V-forms in ancient Greek.

An excellent article written by Ronald Ross and published in the Bible Translator several years ago ("Marking Interpersonal Relationships in *Today's Spanish Version*," *BTP* 44 (1993), 217-231) points out that most Bible translations into the Spanish language, which has a formal T/V distinction, completely avoid using the V-form. However, as Ross indicates, *Today's Spanish Version* is an exception. Yet even this translation is not consistent in the Gospels, in that it almost never uses the V-form when Jesus is conversing with someone.

The present article first examines some possible objections to using both T- and V-forms in Bible translations into languages that normally make this distinction; it also offers responses to these objections. Then it looks at one example of how T- and V-forms were applied in a limited corpus, namely address situations involving Jesus, using data from the translation of the Gospels into Tuvín, a Turkic language of south Siberia.

### Some objections to translating T/V-forms contextually

**Objection 1:** A literal translation of the pronoun *su* with a T-form faithfully represents the social context in which the NT was written. If people addressed each other using only *su* in that culture, then translators should not project their own contemporary social system onto the text by using V-forms also.

**Response**—In dynamic translations, it is not the form of the source text that translators should try to render, but rather the social attitude of the speaker toward the addressee in the receptor context. The sociolinguistic norms of the target language concerning T/V-forms are very important in deciding how to get the author's portrayal of this attitude across to the reader. Translating *su* invariably as T renders the grammatical form of the Greek 2nd person singular pronoun. However, it clouds the Evangelists' portrayal of the social relationships between the speakers and addressees in the Gospels. If a speaker in the NT uses *su* in a context that obviously shows respect to the addressee, translating with the T-form into a target language which uses V-forms for this purpose does not faithfully render the speaker's attitude. It may actually give an opposite meaning.

The absence of this particular distinction between T/V-forms in ancient Greek, of course, does not mean the absence of social differentiation in any of the ancient Hellenistic, Jewish, or other Mediterranean societies. It is obviously not the case that the NT period was a golden age in which there were no social distinctions and everyone considered others to be their equal.

**Objection 2:** If the Greek text does not make this distinction in the pronouns of address, how can translators be sure what attitude the characters in the Gospels were really conveying? Do we not run the risk of giving a wrong impression of relationships if there are no pronominal signals in the source text?

**Response**—The Greek text can, and often does, clearly show social distinctions, not just by means of its pronouns. The most readily visible means for this are:

- titles of respect (*lord, teacher, master, rabbi, excellent Theophilus*) as opposed to condescension (*daughter, child*), or disrespect (*hypocrites, brood of vipers*);
- speech verbs that semantically exhibit deference (*beg, beseech*) as opposed to authority (*command, criticize, charge*);
- actions that clearly demonstrate the social self-perception of the speaker, such as bowing down to the addressee as against spitting at him;
- and possibly, the position of the vocative in relation to the other parts of the sentence.

It must, however, be admitted that social distinctions are not overtly marked in the Greek text everywhere. Because of this, the interpretative decision is more difficult in some cases than in others. For example, from the immediate context of Luke 8.20, we cannot be sure who informed Jesus of his family's arrival. Nor can we be sure what social attitude this person had toward Jesus when conveying this message. In such texts, the translator makes an educated guess based on knowledge of the broad cultural and narrative context. In Luke 8.20, there is no

good reason to assume that the messenger is hostile or disrespectful to Jesus, so the address most likely should be taken as polite.

A parallel with this type of mandatory translation decision can be drawn from the well-known example of translations into languages, such as Tok Pisin, which distinguish inclusive 1st person plural (we = my group and your group) from exclusive 1st person plural (we = my group but not your group). This distinction is not found in ancient Greek or any contemporary European language. When translating the NT into such a language, however, the translator must make decisions concerning the specific reference of Greek *hēmeis*. The Greek pronoun does not distinguish between inclusive and exclusive reference, but the requirements of the target language force the translator to make a choice each time it occurs.

**Objection 3:** This objection is theological in nature, and applies specifically to pronouns involving the main character of the Gospels, Jesus: how will readers react if God is addressed with one pronoun form while Jesus is addressed with the other in the Gospels? Will this not cause irreconcilable cognitive dissonance for Christian readers, who believe Jesus to be God Incarnate?

**Response** —One reason Ross gives (230) for the use of unnatural T-forms in reference to Jesus in *Today's Spanish Version* is that “[Jesus’] divinity looms so high in the minds of the translators that they forget his humanity. And because the Deity is always addressed as T in Spanish, Jesus must be so addressed, even when interacting with persons who are unaware of his divine status, or do not believe it.”

Some readers’ immediate reaction to an approach advocating contextual T/V renderings may be that Bible translation should not include “theologizing.” Yet, when translating a book that touches heavily upon theology, such as the Bible, we must interpret not only the social and historical context of the source text, but the theological one as well. Of course, I am by no means advocating “eisegeting” a particular confessional theology into a Bible translation. What I mean is that a translator must not shrink from the task of interpreting the theological context of the Bible just to avoid being accused of advocating a particular theological viewpoint. In the case of pronominal address of Jesus, is it not theologically misleading to promote the notion that everyone in the NT considered Jesus divine? After all, this is one possible effect (even if not consciously recognized by the readers) of using only the T-form when Jesus is addressed. It runs the risk of creating a docetic aura around Jesus, and softens some of the important narrative tension created by the ignorance of Jesus’ followers during his lifetime.

Let us take the Transfiguration narrative as an example. An inappropriately-used T pronoun might indicate to the reader that Peter already recognized Jesus as God Incarnate. What then would be the point of the Evangelists’ comments that Peter did not understand what he was saying in offering to build three booths? Was Peter really consciously making the idolatrous suggestion that Moses and Elijah deserve equal homage with God the Son? Or were the Evangelists trying to highlight the fact that even Peter, one of the closest disciples, *did not yet truly understand* that Jesus was infinitely superior to the prophets? Is it not the translator’s duty to try to make this important fact clear to readers of the Bible? Using contextually-appropriate T and V pronouns for Jesus in the translation will

help contemporary Bible readers understand better what the first Greek-language readers might have understood of the situation. At the least, it does not obscure the social and theological setting as a T only translation does.

The problem of “cognitive dissonance”—basically, a difference in understanding—on the part of modern Christian readers of the NT can be limited if translators attempt to faithfully render the ancient authors’ point of view. We can apply this principle to the question of how Jesus was addressed in the Gospels. The view that Jesus is God Incarnate is the *result* of the teaching about him as presented in the NT. But Jesus’ contemporaries who interacted with him during his lifetime did not hold such a view. The Evangelists show that this understanding came about only after Jesus’ resurrection. Translators therefore should take care not to use pronouns that could give the impression that from the outset Jesus was understood as God Incarnate.

### **T- and V-forms involving Jesus in the Tuvin Gospels**

In light of the approach advocated in this article, presented below is a detailed example of the decisions about the use of T and V pronouns taken by the translators of the Tuvin Gospels. The Tuvin language is one which distinguishes between T- and V-forms of the 2nd person (only singular) pronoun. Only the address forms relating to Jesus are discussed, together with the social, contextual, and theological factors that were considered by the translation team when choosing what form to use. Because one of the main factors for choosing a T- or V-form is the specific social situation of the given target language, this solution is not offered as a general translation model applicable to all other languages that make a T/V distinction. Nonetheless, the reasoning process behind the choices made in the Tuvin translation will hopefully be of help to other translation teams struggling with this issue.

### **Jesus and the common people**

Those who came to Jesus requesting exorcism, healing, or other help did so with an attitude of great respect toward Jesus, addressing him as Master, Lord, etc. They considered him to be a powerful prophet and authoritative teacher sent by God. However, most did not know that he was the long-awaited Messiah-King; and certainly he was not at that time seen as God Incarnate. There is no reason given in the text of the Gospels for Jesus’ supplicants to necessarily address him in the same way they addressed God. The Tuvin translates all such addresses of Jesus with a respectful V-form, even though God is addressed with the intimate T-form in the NT. This follows the church usage familiar to Tuvin Christians in prayer.

Jesus responds to those who come to him from a position of authority. In Tuvin, this was rendered with a T-form. One objection to such a rendering was that in the Tuvin culture, younger people usually address older people with a V-form as a sign of respect, and it is probable that some of Jesus’ supplicants were considerably older than he was. However, passages such as Mark 5.34 (“Daughter, your faith has healed you”) and Matt 23.37//Luke 13.34 (“Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings”) indicate that Jesus held a paternal attitude towards all people who came to him in faith, regardless of their age. For the Tuvin

translation team, this reasoning justified translating such addresses with the T-form in just about all such situations.

### Jesus and his disciples

**Pre-resurrection**—The main question here is whether respect or intimacy was the dominant feature of the disciples' relationship with Jesus. There are elements of both visible in the Gospel texts. Respect is evidenced by their frequent use of *kurie* and *didaskale* in addressing Jesus. These vocatives demonstrate the disciples' overt recognition of Jesus' superior position as an honored teacher or rabbi. They also know that Jesus is a mighty prophet, and eventually realize that he is the long-awaited Messiah. Yet there is no evidence that the disciples recognized Jesus as God Incarnate during his earthly ministry. Over and over, the Evangelists emphasize that the disciples' faith was in many ways ignorant and unaware of the true nature of their teacher. The designation *huios theou* "Son of God," which the disciples attribute to Jesus (for example, in Matt 16.16 and John 1.49) reflects the Jewish expectation that the Messiah would be the God-appointed king of Israel. In the OT, the king was sometimes called God's son (2Sam 7.14; Ps 2.7). This title underlined his special relationship with God and consequent authority, without attributing a divine status to the king himself. Even the Jewish religious authorities accepted that the Messiah could be referred to as the Son of God (Matt 26.63). Thus, when Jesus' contemporaries called him the Son of God, their understanding of what this term meant was not the same as that of later Christians. It is only after Jesus' resurrection that his followers understood him to be the Son of God in a much more special way than a human king.

Signs of the disciples' greater intimacy with Jesus are also seen on occasion, such as when Peter felt close enough to Jesus to rebuke him on the road to Jerusalem (Matt 19.27; Mark 10.28). Admittedly, these are much rarer than situations in which respect is shown. In the opinion of the Tuvin translation team, the feature of respect outweighed the intimacy feature, and so the V-form was chosen when the disciples addressed Jesus.

When Jesus addresses his disciples he does so mainly as a teacher speaking to his students, although his paternal attitude toward the masses also applies to them (cf Mark 10.24). In Tuvin, teachers usually address students with the T-form. There is a complicating factor here, in that teachers may address their (adult) students with a V-form in order to maintain a level of formality and distance. However, the relationship of Jesus to his disciples is not characterized by coldness or distance in the Gospels. The T-form was chosen in the Tuvin translation as most appropriate in this situation.

**Post-resurrection**—The event of the resurrection fundamentally changed the relationship between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus' followers acknowledged him not only as teacher and Messiah, but also as God (as declared by Thomas in John 20.28 and reflected in the Trinitarian formulas found in the Epistles). Should a T-form therefore be used by Jesus' disciples now that they recognize him as God? If the Tuvin translation had chosen to bring out the component of intimacy as more prevalent in the disciples' pre-resurrection interaction with Jesus, there would be no problem in continuing to use the T-form post-resurrection. However, since the disciples addressed Jesus with the V-form before his resurrection as a sign of

respect, it may seem strange to Tuvin readers if the disciples then begin to use the T-form to address Jesus after his resurrection. Use of the T-form does not mean that the disciples respect Jesus less than before. In the opinion of the Tuvin translation team, the change to a T-form pronoun in this situation highlights the change in the disciples' consciousness about Jesus. A switch from V to T signals this greater degree of intimacy due to their recognition of Jesus as God.

Because of these sometimes conflicting features of T and V usage, this is a difficult question to resolve completely satisfactorily. Fortunately for translators, Jesus is directly addressed only very rarely following the resurrection (John 20.16, 28; 21.15-17, 21; Acts 1.6; 7.59; 1Cor 16.22; Rev 22.20) and not all of these addresses include the 2nd person singular pronoun or verb form.

### **Jesus and the religious authorities**

**Conflict**—Most of the scribes and Pharisees did not accept Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, or even a pious teacher. Their typical reaction to Jesus included criticism, rebuke, and open animosity. The frequency of hostile interaction seems to be greatest in the Gospel of John, where not only the religious authorities, but the *loudaioi* as a whole, treat Jesus with suspicion and scorn. The Tuvin translation renders such an attitude with a T-form. There do not seem to be any cases in the Gospels in which Jesus is in conflict with an individual Pharisee or scribe. In languages such as German or Uzbek, which distinguish between T- and V-forms in the plural as well as in the singular, translators would have to choose the plural form that fits best for expressing Jesus' attitude to groups of his enemies.

**Sycophantic**—Frequently, scribes, Pharisees, and their disciples approached Jesus with a pretense of respect. These occasions are usually marked by their use of titles of respect such as "teacher." Though their ultimate goal was to embarrass Jesus, they at first addressed him politely, even using flattery on occasion. This is unquestionably a situation in which the V-form is appropriate to bring out this nuance in the Tuvin translation. There are very few texts in which Jesus addresses one of these flatterers individually (Luke 7.40; 10.26). In these cases, a T-form was chosen in the Tuvin translation.

**Respectful**—It must be noted that not all of the religious authorities were hostile or sycophantic toward Jesus. Some, like Nicodemus, believed Jesus to actually be who he claimed himself to be. This characteristic places them in the category similar to that of "disciples." Other rare individuals (for example, the lawyer in Mark 12.32) engaged Jesus in dialogue without seeking to belittle or disgrace him. The Tuvin rendered such cases with a V-form.

### **Jesus and Pilate**

It is unquestionable that Pilate, as governor of Judea, would consider himself superior to Jesus, a carpenter and itinerant teacher, on the power hierarchy. This is especially visible when Pilate reminds Jesus that he is the one who decides whether Jesus lives or dies. A T-form is appropriate in Tuvin to render this attitude. The more difficult question concerns the form Jesus should use in responding to Pilate. On the one hand, it can be argued from passages such as John 18.33-37 and 19.11 that Jesus did not accept Pilate's authority. There Jesus affirms himself as king and lets Pilate know that Pilate's authority is subordinate to God.

On the other hand, it seems likely that Jesus would show due respect to the authorities, not out of fear for his life, but rather because this constituted a part of the Jewish concept of righteousness (cf Exod 22.28; Acts 23.5; 1Pet 2.13-17). Based on this consideration, Jesus addresses Pilate with the V-form in the Tuvin translation. This was also the decision for Matt 26.64, the only case where Jesus addresses the High Priest in the 2nd person singular.

One potential problem with this solution is that readers may think that Jesus is trying to curry the favor of these powerful people in order to save himself. Before making a final decision the Tuvin translators did comprehension testing concerning this point. None of the readers interpreted Jesus' use of the V-form in this way, but rather said that Jesus was showing respect appropriate to the position of his addressee.

### **Jesus and John the Baptist**

This relationship is somewhat complicated. John and Jesus are relatives, John being the older. However, John recognizes Jesus as more important than himself, as the Messiah whose sandal straps he is not worthy to untie (Mark 1.7). At the same time, Jesus highly respects John, submitting to the inferior position by receiving John's baptism, and later calling him the greatest among the prophets (Matt 11.7-15). In the Tuvin translation, we finally decided that the overall circumstances indicate that John addresses Jesus with the V-form as a sign of respect, while Jesus responds with the T-form since he is conscious of his authority even over John.

### **Jesus and demons**

The demons recognize Jesus for who he truly is, beg him for mercy, and obey his authoritative commands, though begrudgingly. The fact that they know that Jesus is the Son of God does not give them the liberty to address him with the T-form. They are not close enough to him to use the T-form to signal intimacy, and do not dare to use it as a marker of disrespect. In the Tuvin, they always address Jesus as V, while Jesus responds with T.

### **Jesus and Satan**

This relationship was also one about which it was difficult to make a firm decision. Fortunately it is limited to the Temptation narrative in the Synoptic Gospels. It is true that, unlike the other demons, Satan questions Jesus' person and authority while tempting him ("if you are the Son of God ..."). In the end, however, Satan obeys Jesus' command to leave him alone. In Tuvin, Satan addresses Jesus with the V-form as a sign of ultimate submission, while Jesus responds with a T-form.

### **Jesus and his mother (Luke 2.48; John 2.4;19.26)**

As in probably all languages with a T/V distinction, so in Tuvin, parents always address their children with the T-form. Mary does likewise in the only passage where she directly addresses Jesus (Luke 2.48). It was assumed by the Tuvin translation team that Jesus always treated Mary with proper filial respect as a fulfillment of the fifth commandment (cf Luke 2.51). This is the case even in John 2, where he addresses her as *gunai* "woman," and at first seemingly turns down her request.

Despite the conviction that Jesus addressed Mary as a good son should address his mother, it was difficult to make a decision about which form this should take in Tuvín. The reason was that the different dialects of Tuvín seem to differ in the ranking of the sociolinguistic connotations of the T- and V-forms. In the Erzin dialect, children address their parents with the V-form; to use the T-form would show a lack of respect for parents. In the Todzhin dialect, however, the T-form is the norm for addressing one's parents; younger Todzhins say that using the V-form to one's parents may signal personal distance or coldness toward them. As in different languages, so in different dialects of the same language, the connotations of the T- and V-forms may differ. After much deliberation, the translation team decided that Jesus would address Mary using the V-form, with the hope that speakers of the Todzhin dialect will interpret the V-form as extra-respectful, not distancing.

### **Jesus and his brothers (John 7.3, 4)**

Whether one believes that these were Jesus' younger brothers, his older half-brothers, or his cousins, it seems that their familial intimacy coupled with a lack of faith and respect would preclude them from using a polite form in addressing Jesus. Using a T-form here in the Tuvín text is an excellent means to reinforce their expression of disbelief and possible mockery of Jesus' mission.

It is interesting to note that in the Tuvín translation there are no cases of reciprocal V-V relationships involving Jesus. This shows that the translation team did not find any relationships in which Jesus and his dialogue partner treated each other with an equal degree of respect or distanced politeness. In most situations, Jesus is in a conscious position of authority when strangers come to him asking for help. One passage where a V-V address might be possible is in John 4, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, in which case two strangers would address each other with the polite and distanced V-form. However, a close examination of this passage allows for the possibility that in v. 9, the Samaritan woman's response to Jesus' request for water is tinged with animosity or mild contempt, not merely incredulity. Then in v. 11, intrigued by Jesus' response, she switches to a more respectful tone of voice, signaled by her use of *kurie* in addressing Jesus. This is the interpretation followed in the Tuvín translation, manifested by reciprocal T-forms in vv. 9-10, followed by a switch to the V-form in the woman's subsequent address of Jesus.

### **Conclusion**

Though ancient Greek did not make a distinction between T- and V-forms of pronominal address, Bible translators working in languages that do have this linguistic resource should not reject using it in their translations. Using both T- and V-forms will make the translation more natural and more accurate in rendering social connotations in speech. A careful examination of the linguistic, cultural, and narrative context of a given passage will help the translator to understand which social attitude is being conveyed by the participants in the text. A study of natural target-language usage will help to decide which form is appropriate in rendering this attitude. Dialogue involving Jesus in the Gospels should not be automatically rendered with the same form as is used for addressing God; rather, the natural form in the target language in the light of the



social context of the dialogue should be the deciding factor for the translator considering which form to use in such passages.

### Summary chart of T/V usage in Tuviv Gospels

	<u>Address Jesus as</u>	<u>Jesus reciprocates with</u>
Common people	V (respect for prophet/healer)	T (authority)
Disciples (pre-resurrection)	V (respect for teacher)	T (authority)
John the Baptist	V (respect for awaited Messiah-King)	T (authority)
Satan/demons	V (fear Jesus' power)	T (authority)
Pharisees (sycophantic)	V (false respect)	T (authority)
Pilate/High Priest	T (superior to inferior)	V (respects authority)
Pharisees (belligerent)	T (enmity, disrespect)	_____
Disciples (post-resurrection)	T (recognize Jesus as God, who is addressed with T; greater intimacy)	T (authority)
Mother	T (intimacy, parental authority)	V (filial respect)
Brothers	T (intimacy, do not take seriously)	_____

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## TRANSLATING THE "GODS"

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### The problem

There has been a lot of discussion lately about how we should translate words meaning "God" or the name of God. However, relatively little has been said about how to translate what we might call "not-God," that is, the various ideas which are covered by the English term "god," written with a small letter "g."

It just happens that in Hebrew, Greek, English, and many other European languages, the same word can be used whether we are talking about God or a god. In many modern languages a distinction can be made by making the first letter a capital letter, but in the biblical languages one could only tell by the context. Nevertheless, the fact is that the languages which serve as the base for most modern translation use the same term for both of these senses. This fact seems sometimes to hide from us the fact that there is a real translation problem here.

The problem can probably be seen most clearly in languages where the word used for "God" is basically God's own personal name. In cases like that, it really makes no sense to use that name to refer to beings other than God himself. Since