

A RATIONALE FOR ADAPTATION

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In the last decade particularly, software has been written to enable adapting an exemplar text into a target language rapidly, compared to the “old translation” methodology (to use Carl Gross’s phrase from this volume). Three computer programs are commonly used: Adapt It, OurWord, and Paratext. While enthusiastically embraced by many, this methodology does not lack critics.

My experience as a translator, first for Djinang (an Aboriginal language in the north of Australia) and then for Takia (an Austronesian language of Papua New Guinea), and as a linguistics consultant led me to identify three factors which cause the greatest difficulty in translation: lexicalisation differences between the languages of the source and target texts, syntactic (word order) differences between the languages, and finally, cultural differences.

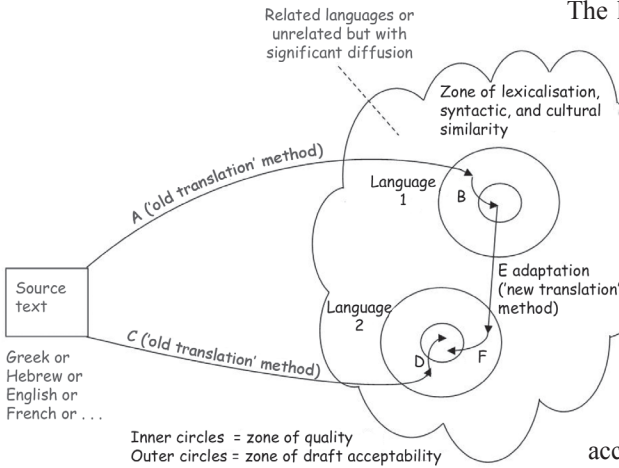
Lexicalisation is the historical process of coining words which allow speakers of a language to communicate meanings relevant to the context in which they live. Speakers in different parts of the world can do this in some surprisingly different ways. This often makes doing translation difficult.

The diagram on the next page illustrates processes of translation, labelled with the terms “old translation” and “new translation,” though I am calling the latter “adaptation methodologies.” My discussion is centred on Adapt It, but it applies also to both Paratext and OurWord with only minor differences.

There are six arcs, labelled A, B, C, D, E, and F. Each arc is a translation process undertaken by a translation team. The (A, B) arc pair represents a real translation done by the “old translation” methodology. Process B is the process of reviewing, refining, and checking the draft translation until it is of publishable quality. The A arc is long because it can take about a decade to produce a New Testament by this process. A is also a difficult process, because of the large lexicalisation, syntactic, and cultural distance between the source text and the culture in which it is embedded and the context of Language 1 (L1). The (C, D) arc pair represents a hypothetical translation process that a different team might perform, starting from the same source text, to translate the New Testament into Language 2 (L2). Clearly, as the diagram shows, (C, D) is little different from (A, B). The arc pair (E, F) represents a real translation done by the “new translation” methodology. It is an adaptation process, starting from L1 as the exemplar text. Arc E is shorter, reflecting the fact that an adaptation will take much less time in order to arrive at a first draft than process C.

Consider the “cloud” in the diagram. This is a zone in which, for languages belonging in this zone, lexicalisation, syntax, and cultural factors affecting a

translation are very similar, typically because the languages in such a zone are historically related, or might not be related but have undergone so much diffusion of areal linguistic features (borrowing) that they are similar. Zones of this nature are very common throughout the world, and common manifestations of this type of interlanguage similarity are “cluster groups.” L1 and L2 are therefore close in the diagram, reflecting this relationship between them.



The larger circles represent a further conceptual zone, which I am calling the “zone of draft acceptability.” What do I mean by that? Notice that all three primary translation tasks, whether new or old translation, have the heads of the arcs A, C, and E terminating within one of the zones of draft acceptability. A translation process which terminates in

such a zone is called a first draft. Such a draft may not be fully clear, exegetically accurate, or natural. But it is clear, accurate, and natural enough that the translation team can improve it to publishable quality.

The smaller circles represent the zone of quality. When the translation team has improved the draft, often with help from consultants and various resources in either book form or software (for example, Paratext), someone qualified to “sign off” on the translation declares it publishable. This process may take some years, but it is qualitatively the same whether the draft was produced by the old or by the new translation methodology. This process is represented by arcs B, D, and F.

Let us consider a fictitious Bible book called Hezekiah. When Hez 3.2 comes to be translated, it turns out to contain a passive sentence in the source language, but neither L1 nor L2 has passive sentences in its grammar. Hezekiah 3.2 includes a high-profile person’s name; L1 has honorifics, but L2 doesn’t, and neither does the source text. Hezekiah 3.2 includes a few noun phrases with modifiers (adjectives); L1 places adjectives after the noun, but L2 places them before the noun.

When the (A, B) team is working on Hez 3.2, they first have to work out how to express the meaning of the passive with an active sentence. Then they have to figure out what term from the honorific system of L1 is appropriate. The noun-adjective order issue is easily handled. They arrive at a draft of Hez 3.2. Along the way, they have had to identify what the original meaning for that verse was, unpacking the semantics sufficiently to figure out how to recast it in a natural way in L1. Now if there were a real (C, D) team, they’d have to do much the

same. But if a published version of the Scriptures in L1 was available, they could look at what the (A, B) team did for Hez 3.2, and either copy the same syntax, or do something different if the syntax didn't work as well for L2 as it did for L1.

Now consider how the (E, F) adaptation team would handle Hez 3.2. They are starting from an electronic copy of the published Scriptures in L1, so the accuracy of the meaning of the exemplar text for Hez 3.2 is of high quality. First, the syntax for handling the change from passive to active is already provided for the translator. She only has to adapt the words of the (now) active sentence in the exemplar text—a simple task for someone bilingual in L1 and L2. Then she reviews the meaning of the sentence as expressed in L2, evaluating it for clarity and naturalness—and she has the time and ability in the software to edit it on the spot to improve either or both. It is possible, but not likely, that she could also check exegetical accuracy at this point. For the old translation methodology's A process, failure to evaluate exegetical accuracy while drafting would be an invitation to serious error. But for an adaptation process, because she is working within the zone of lexicalisation, syntactic, and cultural similarity, it is unlikely that any serious exegetical inaccuracy will have been created by adapting the words of the L1 active sentence. So exegetical checking can be postponed until process F commences. She is free, however, to make her choice either way and the software will comply.

Second, the translator comes to the part of the verse where there is an honorific term. She speaks L1, so she understands what is meant, but her language, L2, doesn't use honorifics and so she makes an adjustment, perhaps not to adapt that term. Finally, each time she comes to a modified noun phrase in L1, she selects the noun + adjective combination and adapts it in the order adjective + noun, which is appropriate for her L2—something easy to do within Adapt It.

At first glance it may seem she has engaged in a translation process fundamentally different from that of team (A, B) or our hypothetical team (C, D). But we must look closer. It is true that she did not expend any mental effort to figure out how to recast a passive sentence as an active one. But she didn't need to—she was standing on the shoulders of team (A, B), who did that work on her behalf, unwittingly, years earlier. What she does do, though, is evaluate how *appropriate* for L2 the wording of that recast sentence is after it has had the lexical substitutions inserted by the software. If it is unsatisfactory, she can alter the wording immediately. *The software does not force one and only one adaptation of a sequence of words upon the adapter.* The adapter is free to make edits, or can use the “retranslation” feature in Adapt It to type a completely different sentence that better carries the meaning in L2.

The other differences in Hez 3.2 were, for an adapter, very common kinds of adjustments. Adapt It makes it easy to handle minor syntactic changes, so long as those changes can be accommodated within the scope of a short phrase. It is also easy to add extra words; the adapter can click a button to insert a “placeholder” into the exemplar text at any point, and then add bridging text to the adaptation at that point. Removing words is simple; the adapter can just not translate them.

Adapt It's automatic insertions are basically suggestions, but they are not guesses. Adapt It looks up the exemplar text's word or phrase in its knowledge

base, and if there is a unique adaptation associated with it, it is automatically inserted (automatically remaking a phrase at that point if necessary), and the box where typing is done (called the “phrase box”) moves to the next empty location. If there are contextual variant adaptations for a given exemplar word or phrase stored in the knowledge base, Adapt It will put up a dialog showing a list of them all, and the translator can then click the one she wants, or type a new adaptation in a text box if none of the listed options is appropriate for the context. What is inserted is given a light purple background, so that the adapter’s eye can immediately see what was inserted by the software’s decision-making process. A series of word or phrase insertions can happen like this, in the blink of an eye. When the box stops the adapter can then visually review the text with coloured background, evaluating it for clarity, naturalness, and if she chooses, for exegetical accuracy.

What makes the adaptation process successful, even though it is potentially very rapid once the knowledge base is populated with a thousand or more entries, is the fact that L1 and L2 are within the same zone. Peoples in that zone think alike, they view the world in similar ways, they coin words for the context in which they live in similar ways because, for related languages, much of their vocabulary is inherited from a common parent language. The grammars of L1 and L2, inherited from the common parent language, will certainly have diverged somewhat. They are, after all, different languages. Yet they will still share much syntax. Contact will also tend to keep the cultures in which L1 and L2 are embedded similar. And so cultural factors affecting a translation in L1 are likely to be relevant to L2 and affect a translation into that language in the same way.

The result of all this is that the number and complexity of translation adjustments needed when translating between L1 and L2 are much less than between the source languages and either L1 or L2. The exegetical work and the work of recasting the meaning naturally in the target language are still present when translation is done by adaptation. However, this work is implicit, embodied within the exemplar text as the result of years of hard work by team (A, B). Clear, accurate, and natural are the touchstones for a successful adaptation process no less than for translation done by the old methodology, although there are some differences as to when those evaluative decisions are forced upon the translator.

The major difference between the old and new methodologies comes down to this. With old translation, drafting a verse involves evaluating alternative possibilities for clarity, accuracy, and naturalness before anything actually gets written down, which may be a mentally exhausting process. With new translation, bilingualism enables a tentative wording to be arrived at quickly with the help of the software, and then the evaluative process happens after the fact. This assumes, of course, that the adapter is diligent and does the necessary evaluation. Failure to do that would be an abuse of the process. So evaluation is involved either way, but adaptation software allows the process to be staged and thus simplified.

Adapt It, similarly to other adaptation tools, typically produces a draft of approximately the quality of the exemplar text, and stylistically very similar. It sometimes can produce a result that hits within or very close to the zone of quality—a dialect adaptation between two dialects with mainly lexical differences is a good candidate for that kind of result. Just as in any translation done by

the old methodology, adaptation requires a post-draft iterative review process to improve the draft to publishable quality. Time saved in getting to the first draft gives extra time for that process. There is nothing in the adaptation methodology that predisposes the resulting translation to be inferior in any important way to that produced by non-adaptation processes. It is certainly true that the adaptation draft will have problems not present in the exemplar text, but they are trivial and easily dealt with in the review process (process F in the above diagram). In fact, feedback from the field suggests that a diligently done adaptation draft is likely to be closer to publishable quality than a first draft done by the old translation process.

These facts, attested now by a decade of field use of the software, lead to a helpful separation of tasks that can be used to considerable advantage. Adaptation done from a good exemplar text lets the adaptation itself be done with less attention to exegetical review of the translation, and without endangering the intelligibility of the resulting translation. The result still ends up within the zone of draft acceptability. After that a second pass through the draft can be done, giving close attention to exegetical accuracy—and this second pass can be done within Adapt It, or the draft can be exported from Adapt It and reviewed in some other software more suited to the task. Many people are using Adapt It for process E and Paratext for process F.

Would getting a New Testament for L2 be better done by the (C, D) process rather than by adaptation? Not really. Consider the two possibilities mentioned before. If no published L1 Scriptures are available, the team (C, D) has to do all the years of intense work, doing what team (A, B) did and coming up with approximately the same solutions—because those solutions are forced on either team by the language and cultural issues discussed before. The end point is much the same as what the adaptation team (E, F) would come up with, but it would take maybe a decade longer to get there. The other possibility is that team (C, D), in addition to the source texts, also has the published L1 Scriptures to refer to. If they then make use of the L1 Scriptures, there is no fundamental way in which that process differs from what the adaptation team (E, F) would do in using the software to help them get to a draft based on the same L1 Scripture text. The processes differ in detail, timings, and the degree of separation of tasks, but not in any way that would render the old translation methodology clearly superior to adaptation in terms of the quality of the end result. But if evaluated by the years taken to get to a publishable text, then adaptation is the clear winner.

Adaptation processes offer a number of significant advantages. They take maximum advantage of similarities between languages in terms of their lexicalisation, syntax, and cultural settings. They use the skills of bilingual speakers to the full, such that even without the skills necessary to do the intense exegetical work on source texts, they can produce draft texts of very acceptable quality. Thus they allow the mission of translation to draw on a much larger pool of available and motivated men and women. And they do all this in a much shorter time frame. To develop this potential, Bible agencies need to become ready and willing to supply quality exemplar texts to bona fide translation teams wanting to do an adaptation.