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CONTRASTIVE DISCOURSE PRAGMATICS AND TRANSLATION
with Implications for Training

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Introduction

There are many issues that arise when one considers what should be included in a training program for Bible translators. Improving the translator's understanding of biblical issues and culture has been the object of special concern in UBS training. These are topics crucial for understanding the source text. In this article I want to deal with the other side of the translation process: the awareness on the part of translators of the use of linguistic constructions of their own languages in discourse.

Smaller language communities which lack a body of translated material—or, in many cases, lack a written tradition altogether—present a standard set of challenges that we face in many parts of the world. What counts as legitimate translation is a new issue for a translator from such a community. The newness of the task presents an almost overwhelming set of challenges. Especially in Bible translation these challenges are encountered in a setting in which translators are very concerned to be totally faithful in their rendering of the text.

Translation across widely divergent language communities presents special problems of discourse pragmatics (how linguistic constructions are used in communication). This article will explore several such issues encountered in translating New Testament texts into indigenous languages of Mexico, and the implications for training translators.

Semantically similar constructions

Grammatical categories and constructions may be semantically similar yet have distinct uses across languages. Many examples can be given of formulaic phrases such as English "good night" and Spanish "buenas noches," which have nearly identical componential semantics but differ in how they are used. (The former is appropriately used only in leave-taking, whereas the latter is regularly used as a greeting.) In addition to such deceptive lexical similarities, parallel semantic distinctions are often found in the grammatical systems of different languages, which can easily be misleading for the translator.

A clear example is the parallelism found in many tense-aspect systems. Languages commonly display a grammaticized encoding of the perfective-imperfective distinction, such as that found between the aorist and imperfect in Greek. It is natural for a translator, already struggling with the difficult issues of lexical equivalence, to simply match the perfective and imperfective forms from the source text to the target text. However, there are several problems with this. First, languages will differ in terms of how many and what kinds of aspectual subcategories they display. In addition, languages differ as to which category—perfective or imperfective—has a narrower usage and which has a wider range of usage. Thus, Chung and Timberlake point out that in Russian "the imperfective has a considerably wider range of usage than the perfective"

(1985:223) whereas "English treats its progressive as the narrowly defined category." (1985:239)

In Mazatec, an Otomanguean language of the state of Oaxaca, the verb system displays two-way tense and aspect distinctions that are common across languages: present vs non-present tense and perfective vs imperfective aspect. In any translation, it might seem that the mapping of the tense-aspect patterns of the Greek or Spanish source texts would be rather straightforward. Most translators, especially those with little experience, face a big enough challenge just focusing on other issues at the level of the clause. Again, the tendency would be to transfer the form that appears to be the best equivalent, without considering the wider context. However, as Schram (1979) has shown, within a discourse, continuity of tense-aspect and continuity of theme interact in a significant way. Maintaining the same theme while changing the tense-aspect "indicates a support relationship and the embedding of the support tense within the thematic tense;" maintaining the same tense-aspect but changing the theme "indicates addition of new information at the same level of thematicity as the preceding;" changing both the theme and the tense-aspect signals that "the new information has to relate to some higher-level theme (if it relates to nothing that precedes, it is incoherent and indicates a jump to some other discourse); therefore, it indicates the border of some higher-level thematic unit." (163).[1]

The crucial point here is that the translator could easily produce what are perfectly grammatical sentences in isolation (and apparently good matches to the source text), but the resulting text could confuse the reader when the sentences are strung together within the same discourse. The semantic components of the tense-aspect systems in the source and target language match but the discourse pragmatics of the two systems differ.

Pragmatically similar constructions

Other aspects of discourse pragmatics are quite consistent across languages. These include features of communication that are not specifically linguistic, but rather inferential in nature. The reader of a text is constantly expected to make inferences, in order to make sense out of what is said. The writer assumes a certain background knowledge on the part of the readers. But more than that, the readers are counted on to invoke certain scenarios, often culturally specific, that allow them to make predictions about the setting. Probably the most common example in the Artificial Intelligence literature is the restaurant scheme or scenario. When a writer says, "She stepped into a restaurant," the reader is expected to invoke a scene which includes tables, chairs, waitresses or waiters, a menu, etc.

Beyond the expectations a writer may have of the reader's background, however, there is also a fair amount of implicit information that the reader is expected to deduce from a text. Many passages display what the literature in pragmatics calls conversational implicature—the central phenomenon discussed in Relevance Theory. An oft-cited example from Sperber and Wilson (1986) illustrates this kind of inference:

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1 The only remaining possible pattern, same theme and same tense-aspect, occurs in repetition and doublets. (Schram 1979:163)

Peter: Do you want some coffee?

Mary: Coffee would keep me awake.

The reply does not answer the question directly, but causes Peter to infer "yes" or "no," depending on the context (whether Mary wants to sleep or stay awake).

In any text, whether it be the Bible or daily conversation, we find examples in which the speaker assumes the ability on the part of the hearer to infer key information. As a random example, consider Acts 16.37. Luke reports the first part of Paul's response to the police as, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret?" Luke could assume the knowledge on the part of his readers that Roman citizens were supposed to receive special treatment in such cases, including no punishment without a trial. A member of a native community of Mesoamerica typically does not bring this information to the text. However, to my knowledge, translators have not felt obliged to add that information. It is generally found that the reader can infer the necessary information, simply as a result of constructing a context which would make sense of Paul's indignant statement. In other words, following a Gricean scenario, the readers start by assuming Paul's comment about his Roman citizenship is relevant to the rest of what he says. If they understand that Paul is pointing out an incompatibility between his and Silas' status as Roman citizens and their treatment, the readers construct a script in which a Roman should not be treated the way Paul and Silas had been.[1]

This is the kind of information that the UBS (formerly Translator's) Handbooks series is often very helpful in providing to the translator. For Acts 16.37 it is suggested that one consider using a contrastive particle, possibly a marginal note, and/or rendering the "Roman citizens" phrase as a clause: "we have the same privileges as those who live in Rome."

The decision about what information to make explicit, what to include in footnotes, what background knowledge can be assumed on the part of the reader, and what one can expect the reader to construct by inference, is a constant struggle for translators.

Part of the reason why readers can be expected to make correct inferences from a text is that fact that any natural text will manifest a certain degree of predictability. The setting evokes certain expectations, and intersentential connectives guide the reader in relating one portion of text to another. After discussing the issue of predictability in phonotactics, grammar, and discourse sequences, Stubbs concludes that, "Predictability may be the single most important feature of human communication, precisely since it is central not only to all levels of language, but also central to memory and to thinking in general." (1983:94). Each portion of a

1 However, if the force of the translation is inadequate and/or the readers have not read the wider context, they may instead construct a script in which Roman citizens were despised and typically received such treatment, understanding then that the reference to Roman citizenship gives the reason for the treatment.

text establishes a scene with certain default settings or expectations. Those settings can be overridden, but only by explicit mention. The relation between the text and sentences that carry such counter-expectation information are typically marked by connectives (such as "however," "but," "even though,") that guide the reader and aid in predicting even such "unpredictability."[1]

The reader of a text is always establishing relations between sentences and between larger sections of text. Sometimes these relations are unmarked, but often there are some textual cues that guide the reader in establishing relations between portions of the text. These cues may take the form not only of discourse particles, but also changes in tense-aspect (see the discussion of Mazatec above), or special grammatical constructions that, for example, inform the reader the story is changing to a different scene, or that the narrator is interrupting to make an evaluative comment. To insure that the readers can follow the text, the translator should be able to consciously manipulate these cues. No doubt there are a few translators that, even without training, are exceptionally gifted in self-expression in their own language, and know how to reshape the content of the message from another language into their speech forms in a natural manner. But most translators will benefit significantly by learning to reflect on the structures of their language and how they are used.

In a number of varieties of Mixtec the use of repetition is a notable feature at various levels of discourse. Anderson (1993) gives examples of parallelism between episodes, repetition to monitor the information flow, repetition of lexical items for semantic effect, and other kinds of repetition. The use of repetition is a common topic in studies of conversation in a wide variety of languages, including English. However, it is usually considered a trait of oral rather than written language, some suggesting that the "repetitious nature of speech is used to make up for the lack in speaking of precision and clarity more common to writing" (Beaman 1984:74). The oral-written distinction in language is a point we will return to at the end of this article.

The translation team working in Alacatlatzala Mixtec has noted repetition of various kinds to be a stylistic strength of rhetoric in the language. In maintaining a rate of information flow and natural style, they have frequently found it important to use the same patterns of repetition as those found in texts created by mother-tongue speakers. In some instances, the repetition is semantic, marking a distributive or intensive feature:[2]

Lk 8.5	NRSV	as he sowed...
	A. Mixtec	he began to scatter scatter wheat-kernels.

1 This is certainly one way in which the creation of a natural language text parallels the composition of a successful musical score. Cf Richmond Browne, jazz pianist, on jazz improvisation:

"The listener is constantly making predictions; actual infinitesimal predictions as to whether the next event will be a repetition of something, or something different. The player is constantly either confirming or denying these predictions in the listener's mind. As nearly as we can tell, the listener must come out right about 50% of the time—if he is too successful in predicting, he will be bored; if he is too unsuccessful, he will give up and call the music 'disorganized.' " (In Coker 1964:15)

2 I am indebted to Lynn Anderson and Carol Zylstra for these examples.

Lk 8.44	NRSV	immediately her hemorrhage stopped.
	A. Mixtec	fast fast her blood stopped.

But there are many examples in which the text requires a doublet, similar to those found in the Hebrew scriptures, often of a positive-negative type:

Lk 1.37	NRSV	For nothing will be impossible with God.
	A. Mixtec	God can do all things, there is not a thing that God can't do.
Lk 8.27	NRSV	he had worn no clothes.
	A. Mixtec	he was going around naked, he refused to dress with any clothes.

Often the use of repetition, in addition to being stylistically natural, helps to reduce the rate of information flow:

Lk 1.11	NRSV	Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.
	A. Mixtec	And thus the angel of the Lord appeared before Zechariah, on the right side of the holy table where the incense was burning he appeared.
Lk 1.13	NRSV	you will name him John.
	A. Mixtec	and so you will put his name John, thus he will be named.

It is important to note that such repetition is lexically required in the first two examples, but in all the other instances, it is a feature of the discourse pragmatics. It would certainly not be ungrammatical to render the verse without the repetition, but it would be unnatural and more difficult to follow. This kind of stylistic effect is easily overlooked by translators unless they have become very aware of discourse style in their own languages.

Information structure

In this section I will briefly discuss linguistic constructions that are known to frequently display similar pragmatic effects cross-linguistically. These are features that fall under the categories of information structure and reference tracking. Because they share similar pragmatic effects, the transference of such discourse-sensitive constructions can be straightforward. However, even when two languages use a similar construction in similar discourse contexts, the frequency or markedness of such constructions may differ significantly between the two languages.

A striking example of this can be found in the relative ordering of constituents within the sentence. Many languages exemplify a pragmatically-driven ordering of sentence constituents. English has a relatively rigid word order determined by the syntactic function of the noun phrases. However, in many other languages, the ordering of noun phrases is not determined by syntactic function at all. Rather, the status of the NP within the information structure of the sentence, whether it is topic or focus, determines its position.

The literature on topic and focus is certainly substantial, and the two terms have meant different things to different writers. I will be using the terms in the way

set out by Lambrecht (1984), which may be the most careful and insightful cross-linguistic study of topic and focus available. Languages differ significantly in the devices used to mark focus structure. In English, the primary cue is prosodic, along with some syntactic constructions (e.g. the *it*-cleft: "It was John who ate the ice cream.") In Japanese, topic and focus are marked morphologically (by *wa* and *ga*).

Very commonly, the pragmatic ordering of constituents in languages of the "free word-order" type reflects the following schema (in which the square brackets demarcate the clause boundaries):

(NEW) TOPIC — [FOCUS + rest of clause]
left detached position — [pre-core slot + core]

The typical topic will be referred to by the least marked pronominal form, within the clause (e.g. verb agreement in Greek and Spanish, unstressed pronoun in English). However, to mark a new topic, an option is often available of putting the NP into a left-detached position, so-called for the separate intonational contour it is often given. (Cf English: "(As for) Tom, well he's sick today.") The typical focus is the entire predicate. (In the same English example, the focus is the sentence portion: " 's sick today.") However, to mark a narrow focus, one option is often that of moving the focus NP to a position at the front of the clause. This has been shown[1] to be the pattern in Tzotzil, a language of Chiapas (1992), and in Tepehua, a language of VeraCruz (Watters 1996a); among other languages, a good case can be made for applying such a model in Greek.[2]

These same functional positions occur in Mazatec and Mixtec, two Otomanguean language families found mostly in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Like all Otomanguean languages, they are VSO in their basic clause structure. Recent research in both language families has shown that a new topic can be established by putting a noun phrase in the left-detached position. In fact, work done by Williams for Mixtec and Agee for Mazatec has demonstrated that new or re-introduced topic NPs and setting adverbials may be marked by occurring in the left-detached position, and narrow focus NPs may be marked by occurring immediately before the verb.

However, there is a significant difference in the frequency with which such constructions occur in texts. Thus, in a database of Tezoatlán Mixtec texts, "about 7.5% of the clauses have fronted subjects.... Only 1.5% of the clauses have a fronted direct object" (Williams 1993:85). That is, about 9% of the noun phrases are fronted. In San Jerónimo Mazatec, on the other hand, "33% of the noun phrases in the corpus were fronted."

Here is an instance of languages from two related language families, in which the discourse function of fronted NPs is virtually identical. However, the frequency or markedness of such fronting is notably different. It is only by being aware of the patterns found throughout a corpus of texts that the translation teams have been able to feel assured of the naturalness of their translations. Even if translators are

1 By Aissen (1992), within a different theoretical framework.

2 Cf also the analysis of biblical Hebrew by Bailey and Levinsohn 1992. But see also the very different (but perhaps not incompatible) analysis by Longacre 1992, 1995.

made conscious of such possibilities for marking new topic or narrow focus in their languages, they must still investigate native-authored texts to be able to know what an effective translation should look like.

Another major issue in discourse is the tracking of reference relations of nouns and pronouns—how the reader knows who did what to whom. Foley and Van Valin (1984) introduce a helpful typology of reference-tracking mechanisms. Some languages depend heavily on *gender* systems. This is developed to varying degrees among the Otomanguean languages of Mexico. Referents of pronouns can be tracked by using distinct pronominal forms, marking, for example, respected, familiar, pejorative, divine, or animal statuses. Other languages utilize a *switch-reference* system, where every clause in which the subject is distinct from the preceding clause is specially marked. Seri, spoken in the northwest state of Sonora, is an example of such a language. Still other languages manifest what Foley and Van Valin call *switch-function* systems, in which constructions such as passive and antipassive are used to maintain the same referent in subject position across clauses, whether it is the agent or the patient. Finally, all languages employ *inference*, some depending on inference to a greater degree than others, to determine the referent of a noun or pronoun.

Tepehua (Totonacan) provides an example of a switch-function language. In narratives, once a topic is established, it is typically maintained in subject position until it loses its topic status. If it occurs as the undergoer of an action in one of the clauses while it is still topic, the passive construction is used, promoting it to subject position.[1] As subject, the topic, once established, is "marked" by null person morphology on the verb (Watters 1986b). Note that passive forms serve a special function in this language, a fact that has to be taken into account in translation.

Texts in Isthmus Náhuatl (often called "Aztec") are remarkable for the degree to which they depend on the inferential strategies of the addressee. Hurst (1993) discusses several strategies which seem to be employed for determining the referent of verb forms with null anaphora, including a "subject chaining strategy," a "subject transfer strategy," and dependence on a ranked inventory of participants, from more central to peripheral. Again, translating sentence by sentence, following the reference-marking patterns of the source text, would produce fully grammatical sentences. However, the reader would find the discourse very unnatural at best, and probably misleading. The translation team in this area has benefited from investigating native-authored texts to consciously produce more natural, understandable translations.

Implications for training

What does this potpourri of discourse issues in translation mean for the training of translators? Translators must be trained to become aware of such differences between the source text and their own language. The simple fact that the target language has similar constructions with similar semantics and pragmatics as the source language should never be a sufficient reason for transferring such constructions in translation.

1 The fact that Tepehua manifests extensive "preposition incorporation" allows it to passive clauses parallel to English "This is the bed that was slept in."

Greek is a good example of a language in which the order of constituents within a clause is determined by discourse pragmatics and not by syntax. Compare the following suggestion for the predominant verb-object order of the Greek of Herodotus:

> The grammar does not specify the order of object and verb; their order is completely determined by grammar-external factors such as discourse or processing factors and it happens that the conditions for VO order arise more frequently in discourse than those of OV, which accounts for its greater textual frequency. (Davidson 1996:3)

Davidson's statistics for VO and OV orders strongly support the suggestion that discourse pragmatics rather than syntax determines order within the clause. Objects whose referent is identifiable precede the verb in only 20% of the cases. Objects whose referent is not identifiable or new to the discourse, however, precede the verb 74% of the time.

The flexibility of clause constituent order in Greek allowed the LXX translators, in many cases, to follow the order of the Hebrew clause rather rigidly. Many scholars have argued that the translation style is overly literal, both in terms of clause order and lexical matching:

> One of our difficulties in explaining the meaning of the Greek in the Septuagint is that it is often doubtful whether the Greek had a meaning to those who wrote it. One often cannot be sure that they did not write down, without attaching any significance to them, the Greek words which seemed to be the nearest equivalents to the Hebrew before them. (Conybeare and Stock 1905:23)

The use of pronouns in the Greek of LXX portions has also been noted as reflecting an overly rigid translation style. Thus Swete makes reference to the "otiose use" of pronouns in some parts of the LXX and claims that, "To Semitic influence is also due the wearisome iteration of the oblique cases of personal pronouns answering to the Hebrew suffixes." (1914:307)

It is true that these criticisms are truer of some portions of the LXX than others; as Jellicoe has commented, "The LXX presents 'translations' rather than 'a translation'." (1968:315). Yet, he also mentions that characteristically,

> [N]arrative again is literally rendered even to the retention of characteristic Hebraisms, as, for example, the use of the cognate accusative; prostitheemi with infinitive to indicate repetition of an action; parataxis; phrases such as "in the eyes of" and "the face of". (1968:316)[1]

In considering these criticisms of the LXX, it is important to note that, in most cases, the constructions in question are not ungrammatical. The criticisms refer rather to the naturalness of the text. One can imagine a translation consultant transported back in time, working with one of those translators. The consultant questions the legitimacy of a particular literal rendering and the translator defensively replies, "It's no problem. We can say it that way in Greek—it may be a little unusual, but it's certainly not incorrect."

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1 Note that some of these may be a reflection of the style of Greek spoken in a bilingual community, as much as deliberate translation renderings.

In the Mexico branch of SIL, as in many parts of the world, we have tried to address the need for translators to become aware of discourse patterns in texts authored in their own languages. Thus in a recent workshop, translators spent time analyzing characteristic features of narratives in their own languages, both traditional stories and personal experience narrations, noting use of particles, tense-aspect forms, fronting of constituents, etc., at the discourse level. Then they returned to work they had previously done in drafting portions of the Gospel of Mark. They compared what they had found to be features of natural texts to the structure of the translated discourse, noting where adjustments would probably be necessary.

In another workshop, teams examined non-narrative texts, including expository and hortatory discourses in their languages, and then looked for corresponding patterns (or lack thereof) in their renderings of portions of 1 Corinthians. One team, for example, came to the realization that there is a variety of ways to tell someone to do something, on a scale from outright commands to very mitigated requests. This might not seem like a striking finding, but the awareness of such a fact in the minds of the translators has a clear impact on the translation—and requires them to work a bit harder to try to determine which form is most appropriate for which passage.

Such training to be conscious of the structures available for discourse is best if it includes both a focus on morphosyntactic structures as well as higher-level discourse.

Basic linguistic training, including some morphosyntactic details, is necessary to raise translators' awareness of the kinds of linguistic constructions that exist in the language. It helps to know what kind of construction one is dealing with before considering how that construction is used in discourse.

The objection may arise that in language communities which do not have a written tradition, all the texts available as models will be oral texts. With the growing literature on the distinctions between written and oral forms, can we really trust oral texts to provide a good model for a written translation?

There are two possible answers. First, as Biber has shown (1986, 1988, 1995), the dichotomy of speech vs writing is an oversimplification. In each language, speech and writing styles differ along various dimensions. Some forms of speech are highly structured and formal; some forms of writing are very "personal."

Second, those features that typically characterize spoken language are most often the features that characterize an easily understood written text. This is supported by research in reading English by children:

> Reading comprehension scores on materials that utilize high frequency patterns of oral language structure are significantly greater than reading comprehension scores on materials that utilize low frequency patterns of oral language structure. (Ruddell 1985:127)

The introductory comments to the Contemporary English Version do a good job of highlighting the importance of a translation "that everyone can *listen to with enjoyment*," i.e., a translation that reflects oral usage.

Similarly, we have found repeatedly that one of the best tests for a translation is having it read for a recording that will be distributed in the language area. Readers will typically not allow an awkward construction to get by without hesitations, false

starts, or outright refusal to read the guilty line, if they know that the reading is being recorded for the community to hear.

Therefore, oral texts provide important models for effective discourse structure, whether one is producing written or audio materials. Translators should be trained to study such texts and consider how different linguistic constructions serve different discourse purposes.

One final caveat must be inserted here. Investigating a corpus of text material is a key component in training effective translators. However, this is not to say that one must be bound by the structures found in that corpus. Consider Fillmore's comments on the matter:

> I have two main observations to make. The first is that I don't think there can be any corpora, however large, that contain information about all of the areas of English lexicon and grammar that I want to explore; all that I have seen are inadequate. The second observation is that every corpus that I've had a chance to examine, however small, has taught me facts that I couldn't imagine finding out about in any other way. (1992:35)

In other words, text investigations are crucial to point things out that we would not otherwise think about. But no body of texts is going to demonstrate all the linguistic constructions possible in the language, nor all the possibilities for using such constructions in discourse. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the translation will depend on the trained linguistic intuitions of the translator, along with extensive checking in the language community.

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The July 1999 issue of *Revue Biblique* (vol 106, part 3, pp 345-357) contains an article by Michael Cahill entitled "Not a Cornerstone! Translating Ps 118,22 in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures".