

INGREDIENTS OF GOOD, CLEAR STYLE

A Comparison of two Versions of the Gospels in a West African Language

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A Mandarin once told Hudson Taylor he had not taken the Gospel message seriously until he realized that the poor language in which it was couched was due to the foreigner's imperfect command of Chinese, and not to a deficiency in the message itself.

In Northern Ghana the published version of the four Gospels and Acts in Dagbani did not satisfy the national church, so a new translation was put in hand, of which the Gospels are nearing completion. For a native speaker it was difficult to express what was wrong with the earlier version, except that it was "foreign". Since superficially there seemed to be no obvious grammatical blunders, and the vocabulary was not obviously faulty, the ingredients of this foreignness were not at first apparent.

Now, however, a comparison of the draft of the new version (NV) with the older version (OV), in the light of a better knowledge of the language, has made clear what the OV mainly suffers from are considerable deficiencies in "discourse structure", i.e. in the way the sentences are combined into well integrated paragraphs, and these in turn into a well-constructed whole.

The NV, on the contrary, shows native-speaker mastery over the means of signposting the text into a coherent, clear prose which is, even for a foreigner, a real pleasure to read. Some of the usages of the OV are so divergent from indigenous usage that one can only assume the original draft to have been produced by a foreigner whose indigenous helpers were reluctant to seem to criticize. The overall effect of the OV on native speakers to whom it is read must be very trying, if indeed the clumsiness and occasional naïve appearance do not blur the message it intends to convey. Such an effect must considerably reduce the evangelistic value of the OV when read to people not familiar with the "European" dialect of the language. In contrast, the new draft arouses considerable interest everywhere it is tested, and foreigners reading it aloud earn undeserved congratulations on their suddenly improved command of the language! "Only one of us could have said that", is a usual comment.

The Analysis

Passages from both versions were arbitrarily selected for the comparison representing (a) straight narrative: Luke 15:11-20; (b) narrative and discussion: John 4:1-42; (c) brief conversational exchanges: Luke 9:43-45 and 49, 50. In each passage the OV showed misuse of a number of the "discourse markers", i.e. means of signposting the sentences. There were instances when their use was suggestive of the kind of simplification reserved for foreigners or children. The means of distinguishing such nuances as

“old” vs. “new” information and of showing the appropriate differences of focus between words or clauses were widely misapplied.

Since the linguistic details of the data are particular to Dagbani and some of its closest relative languages, the parallel texts will not be presented here, but examples will be given of a whole range of features which distinguish the two versions, as they affect the discourse structure in particular.

Each of the passages will be discussed separately, with the comments grouped so far as possible under the same respective rubrics.

English citations are from TEV, unless they are literal back-translations from the Dagbani.

Old and New Information

Since this is a somewhat new subject in linguistics, it may be well to give a few examples of what is meant here by “old” and “new” as it affects all the passages selected.

It is not simply a matter of the newness of a whole paragraph of information, as for example the disciples’ report to Jesus on their recent preaching tour. More specifically it concerns the clause-by-clause and even word-by-word progress of the information as it reaches the hearer. In the sentences “someone has arrived” or “a man has arrived”, the whole information is new, and the expressions “someone” or “a man” indicate that the person concerned has not been mentioned hitherto. If, however, one says “the man has arrived”, the newness of information is only in the words “has arrived”, since the word “the” before “man” implies previous mention and so signals oldness.

When the disciples, in their trekking report (Luke 9), say, “We saw a man casting out demons in your name, and told him to stop, because he does not belong to our group”, the whole report is of course new to Jesus and to us. Furthermore, in the first part, the pattern of “we saw a man . . .” clearly indicates new information regarding an unknown person, while the next clause gives new information about what was then done by “we”, which is itself a pronoun giving old information. When, however, we come to the last clause, the information “he doesn’t belong to our group” is by now old, not only since “he” refers to a previously mentioned person, but because it repeats the implication of unknownness conveyed by the formula “we saw a man”. Now, in English, where “because” has no bearing on oldness or newness, but simply indicates the relationship between its clause and the other clauses nearby, the question whether or not “he doesn’t belong” is old or new, may seem like a quibble. It happens, however, that in Dagbani the “because” that introduces old information differs from the one that introduces new, so that the matter is by no means a quibble.

In comparing the two sentences “I went to see a woman and she was ill” and “I went to see a woman who was ill”, one of the contrasts is in the attitude of the speaker towards the “illness” mentioned. In the first, he wants to show the hearer that at the time of the visit the illness was new to him, and he wants the hearer to share this newness; in the second example there is an implication that the illness was already known of, and may even have

been the cause of the visit, so that the speaker presents it as old information, though the speaker may till now not have known about it.

In English, oldness and newness are often conveyed by variations of intonation or stress which are not normally shown in writing. In Dagbani, which has a number of short words or elements having this purpose, it is essential to understand something of how the old/new contrast is shown, in order to write the language correctly. The translator in any language needs to be aware of this and other shades of meaning and contrasts which he may never previously have heeded.¹

List of Topics

In the following discussion of the passages selected, the comments are grouped under certain headings. Here is a list of the headings and their numbers; not all are represented in treating any one passage.

1. "Old" vs. "new" information; clause focus.
2. Explicitness (general)
- 2a. Focus within a clause
- 2b. Transition
- 2c. Vividness
- 2d. Use of pronouns.
- 2e. Demonstratives and articles
3. Accuracy (general)
- 3a. Verb forms
- 3b. Distinct events vs. multiple processes
4. Exegesis
5. Miscellaneous

Luke 9: 49, 50

These two verses are taken first, as illustrating in a brief compass several basic problems. Taken individually, the clauses in the OV are free of obvious blunders, but their inappropriateness in the context mars the total impact of the passage.

1. "Old" vs. "New" Information: Clause Focus

- (a) v. 49: "We saw a man driving out demons . . . we told him to stop because (Greek *hoti*) he doesn't belong to our group."
- (b) v. 50: "Do not try to stop him . . . for (Greek *gar*) whoever is not against you is for you."

In (a) the fact that the man "doesn't belong" to the group of disciples is implied by the reference to him as "a man", so the reason for telling him to stop is to that extent "old" information, in that it can be inferred from the context. In (b), on the contrary, the reason given is not to be inferred from the context, and is totally "new" information to the disciples.

¹ For technical discussions on the matter, see the chapter "New and Old Information" in Wallace L. Chafe's *Meaning and the Structure of Language* (University of Chicago, 1970); and my "'Old' and 'New' Information: a new look at subordination in Dagbani" (paper to the Linguistic Circle of Accra, 1971, to be published).

The correct markers for “old” and “new” reasons in Dagbani are respectively *ni . . . zuɣu*, as for (a), and *dama*, as for (b). These are each used appropriately in NV. In addition there is a difference of focus, in that (a) rather reason clauses, on which the passage hinges, are thus misconstrued in the prohibition over the prohibition itself.

In the OV, (a) is handled as “new”, using *dama*, while in (b) there is no conjunction of reason, which gives the impression that the reason has only just occurred to the speaker, rather than being a profound truth. Both reason clauses, on which the passage hinges, are thus misconstrued in the OV.

3a. Use of Verbal Forms

V. 50: “Do not try to stop him.” Of the possible ways of expressing a prohibition, OV wrongly uses one that warns against performing a future action (*miri ka . . .*), while NV, noting that the action has already once taken place, uses the appropriate marker (*di*), and uses a “habitual” form of the verb stem itself. The first “don’t” would have been correct if used with “again”.

4. Exegesis

V. 49: “in your name”. OV interprets this as “because of your name”. NV on the other hand takes the “name” as the means whereby the demons were expelled; he has/uses your name (and) drives-away evil spirits.

V. 49: “John answered”. NV correctly has “John said” while OV uses *gargi* “reply” in a manner not appropriate to the context. *Gargi* is rather kept for introducing pronouncements commenting on what has been said.

Luke 15: 11-20

1. “Old” vs. “New”; Clause Focus

V. 20: “So he got up and started back to his father. He was still a long way off (Greek ablative absolute) when his father saw him (Greek main clause); his heart was filled with pity . . .” OV renders this by four coordinate clauses linked by *ka* “and”. There is thus no difference of prominence between them, whereas the Greek and TEV both subordinate one of them. Although in the surface forms these two languages do not subordinate the same clause, the effect of prominence in both focusses on the third clause as compared with the second.

In Dagbani it is acceptable to use subordination in the second clause, but not solely for a change of focus as in the Greek. The Dagbani subordination is only possible when, as here, the information in the clause is “old”, being inferred from the previous clause which only speaks of the young man “starting back”, and not of his arrival. The NV therefore correctly renders as “When he was still far away (and) coming, his father saw him . . .”, bringing the father’s reaction into focus in preparation for the next episode.

2. Explicitness

Under this heading are included expressions and transition markers which good Dagbani requires should be made explicit. In this respect TEV provided

a good model which was not available to those who made the OV. NV, however, makes explicit many relationships which are not so in TEV, so it is not a mere imitation of this version.

V. 11: "Jesus went on to say . . ." NV says: "Jesus parabled them this parable in addition . . ."

V. 17: "All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat." NV says: "How many hired workers are at my father's home and have food, eat, are satisfied and stop?" There is a marker to focus on the "how many?", and the verb "are satisfied" makes explicit the reason for stopping eating.

V. 18: "against God and against you". NV adds gba "also" after "you".

V. 16: "He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but (Greek *kai*) no one gave him anything." OV reorders: "No one gave him anything, so much so that he wished . . ." While such a procedure is quite legitimate in itself, NV retains the order, interpreting the last clause as a "new" reason: "He wished . . . for (dama) no one gave him anything." Where Greek has a very general *kai*, then, Dagbani has an explicit reason conjunction in NV.

V. 19: "I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers." OV has a hiatus at the semicolon which NV prefers to fill with amaa "but", in this context meaning "on the contrary". The contrast is further reinforced by a "(not) even" (hali . . . gba) in the first half of the sentence.

2b. Transitions are explicitly marked in NV at several points where OV does not mark them.

V. 12a: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said . . ." NV uses *ti* in the last clause, showing that the parable proper is beginning, after the title.

V. 17a: No one gave him any (food). At last he came to his senses . . ." NV uses *ti* in the second clause to mark the lapse of time.

V. 17b: "they have more than they can eat, and here I am, about to starve." NV has *ti* with "here I am", to heighten the contrast involving change of place.

V. 20b: "(he) started back to his father. He was still a long way from . . ." NV has *ti* to mark the change of time/place between the sentences.

V. 13: "He wasted his money in reckless living." Dagbani renders: "he took his money and acted uselessly". NV, however, correctly omits the *ti* which OV uses, which would imply that there was a plan in the wild spending, inferred from the change of time/place which *ti* marks between verbs.

V. 15: "He was left without a thing. So he went to live with one of . . ." OV marks the transition with *naanyi* "then", which implies an orderly and expected sequence of events. NV has *di saha* "thereupon", which sets the scene for a new episode.

2d. Nouns vs. Pronouns

V. 12: "So the father divided the property." NV has "his father" where OV has "he".

V. 16: "He wished he could fill himself . . ." NV has "the lad" where OV has "he".

3a. Use of Verb Forms

Passim: Throughout this passage the verbal particle *daa*, indicating time more than one day removed from the present, occurs only three times in OV out of the nine times where it is used in NV. One additional use of it in OV is not followed in NV.

V. 20: "He got up and started back to his father. He was still a long way . . ." For the second verb OV has *labi* "returned", which implies completion, while NV has the progressive form *labiri* "was returning", which is suited to the next sentence by clearly indicating that the time is still prior to arrival.

5. Miscellaneous

V. 13: "after a few days . . ." Where OV says: *di bi yuui* "it was not long", NV has an idiom: *di bi niŋ daba ayi* "it was not a couple of days".

V. 16: "the bean pods which the pigs ate". Where the OV uses a long relative clause involving a cultural adaptation to the kind of food the pigs were eating, NV says quite concisely "the pigs' food". In the African context, pigs eat rubbish quite inedible by human standards.

John 4: 1-42

1. "Old" vs. "New": Clause Focus

Vv. 1, 3: "The Pharisees heard that Jesus was . . . (3) When Jesus heard what was being said, he left Judea . . ." (Greek "When (*hōs*) Jesus, therefore, heard that the Pharisees had heard that he was . . . (3) (he) left Judea . . ."). In the context, Jesus's hearing about what the Pharisees were saying is "new" information. To subordinate it in Dagbani on the superficial model of the Greek is not possible, since this would indicate it as old information. The extensive reordering in the TEV is necessary to obviate this same implication. The OV retained the subordination after the Greek, despite its wrong implication, but the NV avoids this by making the first Greek clause coordinate with the last. In order to preserve the focus on the "he left Judea", NV introduces this clause by *di saha* "thereupon", and says: "Jesus learnt that the Pharisees . . . (3) Thereupon he left . . ." This opens the way to begin the narrative proper.

Vv. 6-8: ". . . (8) (His disciples had gone into town to buy food.)" (Greek uses *gar* as the marker of this clause.) As TEV shows by the punctuation, this clause is parenthetical where it stands, and explains how Jesus came to make his request to the woman. In chronological order, however, it refers to what preceded v. 7. Both Greek and English can retain this sentence order since they have a "flashback" tense in the verb. Dagbani is not so equipped, however, but sometimes makes its flashbacks by adding "already" or the like. In these verses, however, a flashback can be difficult to distinguish from a sequential order. NV therefore prefers to reorder the clause to follow the chronology, and so places v. 8 before v. 7. By retaining the Greek order in OV, where there is no "already", the only implication can be that v. 8 follows v. 7 chronologically, so that the reason for the request by Jesus is

unknown. The reordered NV says: "Jesus sat by the well to rest, and his disciples went on into town . . . and a Samaritan woman came . . ."

Vv. 27-30: "But none . . . asked him, 'Why are you talking with her?' (28) Then the woman left her jar . . . and said to the people . . . (29) . . . (30) So they left the town and went to Jesus." (Greek has coordinate clauses, with a major transition marked by *oun* at verse 28.) NV follows this, with a major transition at v. 28, and a simple ka "and" at v. 30. OV reverses this, by having the ka at v. 28 and the major transition at v. 30, though there is to be another major transition at the next verse: "In the meantime . . ."

2. Explicitness

V. 14: "will never be thirsty again (14) For (Greek *alla*) the water that I give him will become . . ." NV follows TEV in having dama "because (+ 'new')" at v. 14. OV has zero link, which is not generally favoured in Dagbani.

V. 22: "You . . . do not really know whom you worship; we . . . know whom we worship." OV uses the ka link at the semicolon, NV uses amaa "but/on the contrary" to make the contrast explicit. OV has "new" information focus on the object of the second sentence, NV has it more appropriately in both sentences.

V. 24: Dagbani says "It is right that those who worship him should . . ." OV uses a general link as "that", while NV uses a stronger link implying obligation or compulsion.

V. 35: "Look at the fields: the crops are now ripe . . ." (Greek has *hoti* at the colon.) NV has zero at the colon. OV has dama "because", which would rather imply that the ripeness was the actual reason for looking.

V. 42: ". . . not because of what you said, but because we ourselves have heard him." OV uses amaa "but/on the contrary". NV has ". . . but no longer because of your words, for we ourselves have heard . . .", which happens to resemble the Greek surface form.

2a. Focus within the Clause

V. 20: "But you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place where we should worship God." The contrast is shown in NV by subject focus in the "new" second clause: "Jerusalem (focus) is God's worship place." OV has focus on the complement, which makes it simply a "new" assertion, having no necessary bearing on what precedes in the context.

V. 23: "These are the worshippers the Father wants to worship him." NV has topic focus on the "worshippers", with reordering similar to the English: "These worshippers (focus) our Father God wants . . ." OV once again has "new" focus on the object, as in a simple assertion.

V. 29: "Could he be the Messiah?" OV: "Is it not the Messiah?" NV: "Would *he* (focus) not be the Messiah?" The latter focusses on the person being discussed, both by a strong pronoun, and by subject focus marking.

V. 33: "Could somebody have brought him food?" NV correctly uses "new" focus, inferring that the event occurred in a time plane now past.

V. 35: "The crops are ripe and ready to be harvested." NV has "The harvest is all ripe and there remains the harvesting" with "new" focus on the last word.

V. 38: “. . . another man reaps. I have sent you to reap.” NV has verb focus on “I have sent you”, indicating that while it is “new”, it arises out of what has just been said.

2b. Transition

V. 19: “I see you are a prophet, Sir. (20) My . . . ancestors worshipped God on this mountain.” NV has *amaa* “but” at v. 20, here indicating a change of subject matter which could be rendered in English by “By the way. . .”, “Which reminds me . . .” etc.

2c. Vividness

This passage in NV is particularly striking for the number of instances where by the use of an additional element or a more explicit word, the effect of the whole is heightened and made more vivid. The back translation alone will be given here, using italics for the words corresponding to the elements here described.

V. 8: NV: “(They) went *on* into town to buy food *hither*.” (i.e. with a view to bringing it back).

V. 10: NV: “If you knew *this* (person) who is asking you . . .”

V. 11: NV: “The well is *very* deep.”

V. 12: NV: “Our ancestor Jacob *dug* this well for us.”

V. 13: NV: “Whoever drinks water *from* this *well*.”

V. 15: “*In that case*, give me the water . . .”

V. 18: NV: “You have *already* married and left five men, and the one *in* whose *home* you *still are* is not *even* your husband.” OV was quite inaccurate: “You are still married to five men and have left them, therefore the one to whom you are now married is not your husband”—an incongruous bit of moralizing!

V. 19: “I *have-just now* realized you are a prophet.”

V. 23: NV: “The *actual* worshippers of God will worship God with *all* their spirit.” OV, by having the wrong construction with “true”, says: “The worshippers of truth will worship God . . .”

V. 28: NV: “The woman left her pot *standing* and *returned* to town.” Omission of “standing” might imply forgetfulness.

V. 31: NV: “After the woman’s departure . . .” Conciser than long time clause in OV.

V. 38: NV: “Others have *already* had the toil, and you *will-be* having the benefit.”

2d. Use of Pronouns

Vv. 27, 31: “his disciples”. NV says: “Jesus’s disciples”. In both contexts the genderless pronoun “his/her” could equally refer to the woman who also might have “followers”.

Vv. 41, 42: “Many more believed . . . (42) and they told the woman . . .” NV deletes the “they” in the second clause. This is obligatory in Dagbani to indicate that the two coordinate verbs have a common subject referent. In English the corresponding deletion is optional, but the retained pronoun is then unstressed. OV retains the “they”, which therefore strictly refers to people other than those who “believed”. The deletion, compulsory in normal

adult style, can be ignored in deliberately simplified style, as for foreigners or children who might lose the thread of who was who. In adult style, on the contrary, the retention is what causes confusion.

2e. Demonstratives and Articles

V. 6: OV wrongly omits the "article" *maa* at the second occurrence of *kobilga* "well".

V. 15: "Give me this water." OV uses no "this/that", but this is only appropriate when one can point to the time concerned. NV uses the "article" *maa*, implying "the water you mention".

V. 23: "The time is coming." English "the" is idiomatic here, in being anticipatory in its reference. Greek has no article. NV correctly omits the *maa* which OV uses, since the "time" has not yet been mentioned.

V. 29: "The Messiah"—English "the" can be used, as here, for something generally known about, and is in a measure part of the title. For this usage Dagbani has the "article" *la*, correctly in NV. OV, which has *maa*, wrongly implies a previous mention.

V. 33: "His disciples." Since they have just been mentioned in the context, NV accompanies this phrase with the "article" *maa*.

V. 42: "The Saviour of the world." NV correctly says "Saviour of this world", neither of the nouns having been mentioned hitherto in the context.

3a. Use of Verbal Forms

The discrepancy in the use of the time particle *daa* is about as marked as in Luke 15, mentioned earlier. In the John passage NV uses *daa* twenty-five times, only twelve instances of which are paralleled in the OV's thirteen uses of this item.

3b. Distinct Events vs. Multiple Processes

In Dagbani a fundamental syntactic distinction is made between (a) a sequence of ordered events, as in "he went out and went in" (*o yiya ka kpe*), where the two processes are distinct, as when one might leave a building and then re-enter it; (b) a multiple process, as in "he went out (and) went in", (*o yi n-kpe*) where the verbs denote phases of an action, as when one might leave one building and continue on into another. The following examples illustrate these constructions as OV and NV use them.

V. 1: "Jesus was winning and baptizing . . . disciples . . ." OV uses the conjunction implying that "winning" and "baptizing" are distinct events. NV, since this refers to something "habitual", links the verbs serially, implying they form aspects of a process of "winning and baptizing", since both events were proceeding simultaneously with different converts.

V. 36: "The man who reaps the harvest is being paid and gathers the crop for eternal life." OV says: ". . . *receives* his pay (and) *stands watching-for* eternal life", with the verbs (in italics) in a serial sequence, implying a multiple process. NV says: ". . . *receives* something for his work, and *gathers* the harvest (and) *lays-it-down* (and) *watches-for* eternal life". Here the payment is set apart as a distinct process for "gathering, laying-down, watching"

which together constitute a multiple process. The OV “standing waiting” seems strangely inactive in the context.

V. 42: “We have heard him ourselves and we know.” OV links the verbs “hear” and “know/find out” in a series, implying “listening to find out”, leaving the actual outcome unspecified. NV, by using a conjunction, shows they are distinct events, so that the second verb indicates the final outcome.

7. Exegesis

V. 6: Greek “the sixth hour” is rendered as “the cool of evening” in OV and as “sun overhead time” in NV.

Luke 9: 43-45

1. “Old” vs. “New”: Clause Focus

V. 43: “The people were still marvelling . . . when he said . . .” (Greek has ablative absolute for first clause: main clause for second.) OV has coordinate clauses, linked with “thereupon”, so giving the correct clause focus. Since, however, the first clause is “old”, subordination is more suitable, as in NV.

2. Explicitness

V. 44: NV: “. . . pay *careful* attention to these words.”

V. 45: NV: “they did not know what this meant, *because* it had been hidden. . .”

V. 45: NV: “and *on the other hand* they were *also* afraid-of Jesus’s *reaction* (lit. heart)”. OV by omitting the italic items, suggests they were both incompetent and frightened. To fear someone’s reaction is forgivable; to say that one fears a person is considered offensive.

3. Accuracy

V. 45: “They didn’t know what this meant.” NV has the correct rendering, “they did not know the meaning of what he said”. OV has an unnatural construction which is apologised for by commas.

V. 45: “They were afraid to ask him about the matter.” OV terminates with a relative clause, but NV more concisely and succinctly says: “. . . to ask (and) find-out . . .”, using the verbs in a series to denote a multiple process.