

*Article*

# Metaphors at Cultural Crossroads: Examples from CIS Countries

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**Abstract**

Translating metaphors is one of the most prominent areas where the importance of respect for the receptor languages and cultures can be demonstrated and in this article I present a few examples from my own experience with CIS (former USSR) languages. Among other treatments of metaphor, I draw on the work of K. McElhanon, who suggests translating scenarios rather than words and expressions, even though scenarios are not identical in different cultures.

**Keywords**

metaphor, translation, CIS languages, translating scenarios

When I was training to become a translation consultant in the late 1990s, David Clark was my main tutor. I have learned many things from him, but the most important was, I believe, his deep and sincere respect for the receptor languages and cultures. He preferred to encourage rather than dictate, so translation teams felt free to look for words and expressions that would fit their own way to describe the world.

Translating metaphors is one of the most prominent cases where the importance of respect for the receptor language and culture can be demonstrated and in this article I present a few examples from my own experience with CIS (former USSR) languages. As for the theory, it is impossible even to list the most prominent latest works concerning metaphors, since the changes in recent decades have been revolutionary, especially with the

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arrival of cognitive approaches to translation. To mention just one particular idea, I refer to K. McElhanon (2005), who suggests translating scenarios rather than words and expressions, even though scenarios are not identical in different cultures.

It is also worth noticing that in modern Greek μεταφορά means “transport.” Whichever direction of travel we choose (whether a metaphor brings the reader to the desired meaning, or brings the meaning to the reader), it is clear that crossing cultural borders may be a serious obstacle on the journey.

## Different milieus

The most obvious examples can be found when translating into languages spoken in a milieu very different from the Middle East, such as Chukchi. This polysynthetic Paleo-Asiatic language is spoken by several thousand people living on the Chukotka peninsula beyond the polar circle, just opposite Alaska. Only reindeer breeding is possible there, no agriculture. Edible plants such as cloudberry (*Rubus chamaemorus*) grow in the wild and are never cultivated, so scenarios related to sowing are completely unfamiliar to speakers of the language.

What can be done, then, with the famous phrase, “A sower went out to sow his seed” (Luke 8.5, here and further quoted from NRSV) which begins perhaps the best-known parable in the New Testament? The present version says *qytǵ’i tyneč’yllqyll’ynritllevyll’yn jarǵety enanretllavy-nvo tyneč’yllqyllti emrenynnevne*, which can be roughly rendered as “the man who makes the bread-grass grow came out to put the seeds of this grass into the soil” (unless specified, quotations are taken from unpublished drafts). This long explication is very far from a natural picture of everyday peasant life such as we find in the original. The meaning will be generally understood by readers whose experience, due to modern media, is no longer limited to the local style of life, but it definitely sounds neither natural nor poetic.

We discussed this case for a long time with the Chukchi translation team, trying to find a cultural substitute, but in the end we gave up. The only natural way to express the idea would be to invent a completely different story about a reindeer herder who treats his herds in different ways so that some perish and some flourish and multiply, but we hardly could call this story a translation. And, after all, metaphors of sowing and reaping are present everywhere in the New Testament, so eliminating them completely was not an option.

With wine, we had greater success: “no one puts new wine into old wine-skins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and

the skins will be destroyed” (Luke 5.37). Needless to say, the process of fermentation is absolutely unknown to the Chukchi people. Alcoholic beverages (almost always strong) arrive in Chukotka in bottles and cause many problems for the local population, who had absolutely no experience of drinking alcohol before they met Russian and American traders. So the very idea of pouring vodka into any kind of leather sack sounds bizarre (trying to get rid of this poisonous liquor?).

Here, we managed to find a substitute. When Chukchis build a sledge, they tie wooden parts together with leather straps. For a new sledge they need to be fresh and flexible, since an old strap which has lost its elasticity would simply break and the whole construction would collapse. This was the choice we made in translating the verse into Chukchi. As for the continuation (“no one after drinking old wine desires new wine”), the translators found another piece of leather equipment used for driving a dog sledge that is better if it is old and tested.

## Undesired connotations

Such examples are of course somewhat extreme. In more common cases, a metaphor may be quite understandable but would have a different and unintended connotation in the receptor language if it is not made more specific. In Mark 9.48, for instance, hell is described as a place where “the fire is never quenched.” This is easy to render in probably any language but the translators into Shor (a Turkic language spoken in south-western Siberia) noticed that the direct rendering creates a rather positive image: what a nice place it must be, warm and full of light! This connotation disappeared as soon as they replaced the word *ot* (fire, light) with *ört* (wildfire).

Jesus’ question in Mark 10.38, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” is usually translated literally because the image is quite clear in any culture. At the same time, the connotation in most languages is highly positive: lending one’s own cup to a disciple is a gesture of special honour and high approval from a teacher. So the Kumyk (a Turkic language from the north-eastern Caucasus) translator chose to add one word to the text, “bitter [cup],” showing the implied connotation of suffering (Сыйлы Китап 2007).

In an opposite situation, Ps 23.4 (“your rod and your staff—they comfort me”) may sound rather negative when translated literally into Tuvan (another Turkic language spoken on the Russian–Mongolian border). The most probable scenario that would be evoked for readers/hearers involves a serious beating after which the speaker keeps silent. So we had to introduce the word “protection”: *dajangyūžyη bile ŷkpyūžyη meni kamgalap, oožurgadyr* (your rod and your staff protect me and calm me down).

## Cultural adaptation

Another Tuvan example comes from the book of Proverbs. In Hebrew, living with a bad wife is compared to living “in a corner of the housetop” (25.24), which makes little sense to the Tuvans. Their traditional homes are movable nomadic yurts similar to wigwams and in no way can a man live on the top of the yurt. With modern urban houses this is more realistic but still sounds awkward and does not evoke the scenario implied in the original: an upset husband prefers to spend his nights on a flat roof outside the comfort of his own home to evade his contentious wife. So, the group has chosen the expression “to live in a far-off doghouse,” which would be the least preferable dwelling for the Tuvans.

Sometimes a slight modification of a metaphor helps to maintain the same scenario while making it more vivid than a direct translation. For instance, in Turkmen (a Turkic language spoken in Central Asia) Prov 10.26 “vinegar to the teeth” became “pepper for the tongue,” and the “gold ring” moved from a “pig’s snout” (11.22) to a “dog’s nose” (*Mukaddes Kitap* 2016). These images sounded more natural while preserving the general idea of a harsh unpleasant taste or a precious decoration used in vain.

Metaphors of clothing representing human qualities, attitudes, or actions seem to be universal but this does not mean that they work in the same way in every language. Colossians 3.14, after a long list of proper clothing, adds, “above all, clothe yourselves with love.” This was rendered in Chuvash (a Turkic language from the Volga region of Russia) as “above all, gird yourselves with the belt of love” (Çĕнĕ Халал 2009). Romans 13.14 sounds yet stranger: “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” In Altay (a Turkic language spoken in south-western Siberia) the direct translation was almost meaningless, as well as versions like “let the Lord be your garment” (Јаңы Кеpeeс 2003). However, when the translator provided a more specific article of clothing, it improved: “let the Lord be your protective armour.” This probably narrowed the meaning but at least rendered the basic idea efficiently.

Sometimes we had to change the metaphor. Hebrews 1.12 says the following about the heavens and the earth: “like a cloak you will roll them up.” Rolling up cloaks is not a universal gesture, so the translation into Crimean Tatar (a Turkic language spoken on the Crimean peninsula) replaced it with the image of rolling up a carpet, which is something well known from everyday experience (Мукъаддес Китап 2016).

In the same project, we had to change a metaphor because it did not collocate well with the previous one. In 2 Cor 5.2-3 Paul speaks about dwelling places and clothing in the same phrase: “in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling—if indeed, when we have taken

it off we will not be found naked.” The metaphor of the body as dwelling shifts to one of the body as clothing. So, the Crimean Tatars modified the last expression to say, “having entered this home, we will not be homeless.”

Sometimes metaphors are simply lost in a translation. This is such a common case that it hardly needs illustration. The opposite is quite rare: when a translator finds a metaphoric expression in his own language that renders exactly the same idea as the non-metaphoric original. This was the case with Kumyk Prov 21.5: “everyone who is hasty comes only to want” was rendered there as *alğasağan suv da dengizde jetmes* “hasty water would not reach the sea” (Эсги Разилешив 2009).

### **Is it a metaphor after all?**

It may be hard to decide if we have a metaphor in the text or a fixed expression that is not understood as a metaphor anymore. In Job 2.4, Satan (or “the accuser”) says to the Lord, “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives.” What is this “skin for skin”? Is it a statement that an exchange should be equal, perhaps from the practice of trade? Or perhaps an invitation for an attack on Job’s body defined by the limits of his skin (cf. CEV “There’s no pain like your own”)? The Crimean Tatar translators gave their best guess, also rather vague, in the text: *džanğa džan* “soul/life for soul/life.” Meanwhile, the footnote gave the literal rendering: *teri içün teri* “skin for the price of skin.” We normally avoid putting literal equivalents in footnotes but here the translators insisted on keeping it simply not to rule out other possible interpretations.

Meanwhile, the Kumyk translators considered this translation (these languages are closely related and mutually understandable) but went for another decision, i.e., to express the preferred meaning with a different metaphor: *Har kim özünü başyn saqlar* “everyone would try to save his own head” (Аюбну Китабы 2018).

All of the above examples involve metaphors that can be called artistic embellishment: practically the same meaning can be conveyed without them, although the text would become less vivid and impressive. There are, however, metaphors that have to do with the central ideas of the Bible itself, such as “the Lamb of God” referring to Jesus. Needless to say, this is a sacrificial animal representing Jesus’ death on the cross for the sake of the salvation of humankind.

Languages spoken beyond the polar circle may have a word for sheep or rather products made from sheep skin but this word has absolutely no natural connotations, like *zebra* or *opossum* for a European. We all know they exist but we have no associations attached to them, other than “exotic

animals we never see in our daily life.” For these Arctic people, the usual sacrificial animal is a reindeer. Their whole life depends on breeding them, so they have many words for reindeer, depending on their age, gender, or function. For the Lamb, the Nenets translators (a Samoyed language spoken in northern Russia) have chosen the word *suyu*, which typically designates a young male reindeer, the most obvious choice for a sacrifice.

Nevertheless, they did not want to break completely with the Russian tradition (Russian being the second if not the first language for most ethnic Nenets). So they added the word *xu'*, which normally qualifies sheep skin or some other product made from these animals. The expression *xu' suyu* “young reindeer made of sheep” looks biologically impossible, but it is quite plausible in the given context, since the first word indicates the exact species and the second one the age and the role of the animal. Thus it could be argued that “reindeer” is not a necessary component of meaning for *suyu*, at least in this expression where it refers to a young animal suitable for a sacrifice.

It may seem that Turkmens who live in Central Asia and keep large flocks of sheep would not have any of these problems. Nevertheless, they have their own troubles. For them, lambs are so ordinary that “the Lamb of God” may sound something like “a chicken of God” for a European (and they have no definite articles either). So, the initial Turkmen equivalent for “the Lamb of God” was *Hudayıň guszusy* “God’s lamb (beyond the age of one year).” Realizing the undesired implicature, the translators seriously considered using a more general expression, *Hudayıň gurbanlyk janlysy* “God’s sacrificial animal.” Later, they reverted to the literal rendering, perhaps because they did not want to lose this metaphor which is really central for biblical theology.

## Conclusion

These experiences in the translation of metaphors illustrate what David Clark taught me about encouraging translators in their search for words and expressions that accord with the way their cultures perceive and describe the world. I wish to express my gratitude to David for his valuable lessons in what can be called *the translator’s humility before the text of Scripture* and, even more important, *the translation officer’s humility before the people he or she serves*. This is probably what helped us most in finding all these solutions in our work.

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### **Abbreviations**

- CEV     Contemporary English Version (1999)  
NRSV    New Revised Standard Version (1989)