

Article

Should Translation Consultants Keep and Share a List of Key Texts and Passages to Check? If So, What Might Such a List Look Like?

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Abstract

Translation consultants find that they keep coming back to some of the same texts and passages time and again in their translation checking. These are texts that present particular challenges across many different projects, and so become places that consultants always make sure they have looked at carefully. This article explores the risks and benefits of using lists of such texts as a guide for checking.

Keywords

translation checking, key passages, key texts, checking lists

Dedication

Fausto unfortunately has never met David Clark, but still has benefited from his *TBT* articles as well as his contribution to the creation of the tradition and culture of UBS consultancy. And while Bob Bascom did not cross paths with David that much outside of Triennial Translation Workshops (TTWs), he always admired David greatly for his TTW and *TBT* contributions, as well as his personal approachability and openness. David was one of the translation consultants (TCs) who seemed to truly value the practice of

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translation as much as its scholarly and theoretical underpinnings. Along with consultants like Howard Hatton, Noel Osborn, Danny Arichea, and Norm Mundhenk, David provided a good balance to some of the academic and theoretical heavy-hitters in UBS of that era whose names everyone knows. At the same time, David excelled on the academic side as well, and is held in the highest regard by all his peers. As a special extra, Bob's wife Lois became good friends with David's wife Glenys, and they spent more than a few TTWs sightseeing at the local destinations where UBS consultants held their meetings. We have missed David and his frequent and valuable contributions, as we have missed many of our other retired colleagues. It is a privilege to honor him here.

Introduction

The question that forms the title of this article will doubtless provoke various reactions from different readers. One might be, "One should no more keep a list of problem texts and passages¹ handy for use with a new project than Bible Societies should publish a red-letter edition of the Bible." The idea could be here that all the parts of the Bible are equally inspired, and we should not go around making canon-within-a-canon distinctions. Or the concern could be that languages into which biblical texts are being translated differ from one another enough that we could not really predict that our predefined lists would work well in new language settings. Or we might be worried that consultants will look only at the texts and passages on their lists, and then declare they have completed the checking of a translation. This last concern might be sharpened by the recent emphasis on translation acceleration, and the possibility that such lists could be used to approve for publication translations that have not been thoroughly checked.

Yet if we are honest, we will admit that even if we consider all parts of the Bible to be equally inspired, there are texts and passages that turn out to be more complicated than others, and not only when it comes to translating them, but also for the exegesis of those texts. This does not diminish in any sense the canonical importance of the less complicated texts. And regarding the concern about linguistic divergence between source and various "translating" (or target) languages,² some of the issues that arise in a

¹ The terms "texts" and "passages" will be used interchangeably to refer to lists organized by biblical references (as opposed to type of translation problem, for example). We do not make a strict distinction between texts and passages, and examples are drawn from individual verses as well as extended passages.

² We prefer the term "translating language," common in translation studies, rather than "target language" or "receptor language," because it conveys a sense of active participation.

given translating language will be new, but others are very similar to those that arise within the biblical text or in other translating languages. So it is possible that a list of difficult-to-translate passages may be useful, even across languages.

In the case where pressure is being applied to a project that has been assigned a specific completion date, a list of difficult passages does not necessarily speed up the translation, but it can help us anticipate some of the passages where the translator might have particular difficulty. That way the project can be assisted more efficiently. But difficult texts are still difficult texts, and solutions must still be found. Time may well be saved in some cases, but the time needed to resolve issues will vary from language to language.

At the same time, all translation consultants have some favorite texts to check (even if they are not written down), as well as the passages they do *not* check so carefully (genealogies and itineraries, for example). So what types of problems are candidates for such a list? There are many, of course, and they are all the usual translation problems that all translators and consultants encounter—poetry is usually more complicated than prose, and there are often textual problems in the source texts, for example. Textual problems (various readings in the source texts), exegetical (interpretational) problems, obscure texts (where the meaning is unclear), or ambiguous texts (where there may be more than one possible meaning) are some of the most common issues that lead consultants to red-flag certain texts.

Examples

An example of a textual problem is 1 Sam 13.1, where the Hebrew text seems to read “Saul was a year old when he began to reign, and he reigned for two years.” There are a range of ways to deal with this verse, which one can readily see in the modern translations. GNB, for example, puts the entire verse in a footnote, while NIV borrows an LXX reading of “30” for the first number, and comes up with “42” for the second (a combination of the round number “40” listed for Saul’s reign in the New Testament in Acts 13.21 added to the “2” in the text!). Sometimes a text like this is treated as an obscure text rather than a textual problem, since it is difficult to interpret sensibly as it stands.

An example of an exegetical problem occurs in Gen 1.14, where the sun and moon are created for “signs and for seasons and for days and years” (NRSV). Some translators of modern versions have taken this to be “signs of seasons (or months) and days and years,” and have even reordered the list to reflect a sequence of days > months > years. But the Hebrew term (*mo’adim*) would suggest to some interpreters that the “seasons” are really

religious festivals and that this term belongs in the same category with “signs” as markers of special occasions, while “days” and “years” are markers of the normal passing of time (the difference being similar to the distinction between Greek *kairos* and *chronos*).

Ambiguity in the text is a large and varied problem that deserves more than one article by itself, but an example of ambiguity that does not allow for multivalence (the coexistence of more than one valid meaning at the same time) occurs in 1 Cor 7.1: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman.” Paul is either uttering these words himself, or he is quoting his adversaries or audience (“you say . . .”). Most consultants will check to make sure the translators are aware of the issue and often will advise a footnote be placed here to explain the problem.

Sometimes a consultant finds that while the source text presents no particular problem, the majority-language versions that the translators are using as references cause doubts and problems. One example is the translation tradition of using “forever” (KJV) to translate “for length of days” in the Hebrew text of Ps 23.6. This could be treated as an exegetical problem (perhaps the KJV translators really thought this text referred to eternity), but at this point it seems clear that the poetic structure of semantic parallelism requires something like NRSV’s “all the days of my life // my whole life long.”

After consultants have spent some time with different language families, they will find there are certain problems (and thus passages) that the languages within a family put into particular focus. Languages that highlight inclusive/exclusive participant relations may well misinterpret the passages where God is speaking to Moses in the second-person singular but logically is referring to all of Israel or at least a larger group of Israelites (e.g., Exod 40.2: “**you** shall set up the tabernacle”). Unless the plural form is used, the translation will clearly imply that only Moses is being referred to (rather than a larger group of workers). The same thing applies when Moses subsequently delivers God’s message. If Moses says “**your** God” (Deut 1.10, etc.), it would mean in some of these languages that God is *not* the God of Moses, but only of the Israelites. These languages require that the first-person plural (“**our** God”) be substituted in such cases.

Languages where there is a word for “older sibling” and another for “younger sibling” may have problems with texts like Gen 42.6 where Joseph’s brothers prostrate themselves before him. We know they are older than Joseph. But if they are older, why would they prostrate themselves before him? In some cases, translators must add “because they did not recognize him as their younger sibling,” or “because they only saw him as a ruler in Egypt.” This is actually simply making implicit information explicit, but is made more necessary by the translating language’s terminology.

Languages and cultures where theophanies and personification of deities are not a part of the worldview may have problems with passages like Exod 33.11 where it says that “the LORD spoke with Moses face to face, as when someone speaks with a friend.” What does this mean? Did God become like a human being in order to speak with Moses? Is not God supposed to be “spirit”? The same thing can happen with passages that speak of the “wings of God,” “eyes of God,” or “arms of the Lord.” Notes can help here, or a generic rendering of “face to face” as “directly,” or “personally.”

There are languages that have different terms for different types of palm tree, each term determined by the palm’s particular use. This can present problems when translating the single term for palm tree into such a language. This is the case in Judg 1.5 for the Piaroas of Venezuela. The text says that “Deborah sat under a palm tree” and that the Israelites went to that place known as “The Palm of Deborah.” But what type of palm was it? And was it used primarily for its edible fruit, or its oil, or the shade it provided? In languages that make this kind of distinction, the translator must decide.

How do we decide?

Then there are factors that seem to have nothing to do with textual or translational problem types, but instead have something to do with the structure of the texts themselves. For example, some consultants have noticed that the first chapters of certain books have interesting problems and belong on a list of important passages to check. Thus in the appendix to *The Theory and Practice of Translation*,³ we find, “Through translation exercises based on various typical and difficult passages (for example, Gen 1, Ps 1, Isa 53, Matt 5–7, Mark 1, John 1, Rom 1, and Eph 1), the consultant and the participants in the project gradually develop principles that will guide them.” It may be the case that sometimes the most important (or at least the most difficult) biblical material is at the beginning of the book.

On the other hand, some passages are lists of names (itineraries, genealogies, lists of tribes) and may well be considered to be of lower priority. Yet there is a reason that these lists of names occur so often at the beginning of biblical books. Genealogies represent the establishment of a traditional authority via lineage—for Jesus, for Moses, and so on. People from many modern cultures may not understand the importance of a line of descent for the status or authority of a person, nor the way in which this is established by a genealogical list. But it may well be the case that in other cultures these genealogies function in ways that are very similar to the way they functioned in the cultures of the Bible. Where that is the case, these texts must

³Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

be rendered with particular care. In a number of translating languages, “and *x* begat *y*” does not work, and has to be rendered “*x* was the father of *y*” or “*y* was the son of *x*.” Itineraries and lists of tribes are likely scene-setting devices that are meant to orient the audience to the narrative that follows. If these devices do not function as such for modern audiences, accommodations have to be found in the translation. Subtitles, notes, illustrations, and other helps are often used to clarify aspects of the ancient text, including literary devices, that are obscure to the modern reader.

Since we have touched on the point of texts which may seem to be less important or even tedious to modern Western readers, yet which are unexpectedly critical for the languages and cultures into which they are being translated, passages that include detailed descriptions of various kinds are also often a challenge. Among these we can consider the list of unclean animals in Lev 11.4-32; passages detailing the duties of priests and Levites in Num 4; the description of “living beings” in Ezek 1.9-19; and the details for the construction of the tabernacle and the elaboration of its utensils (Exod 25.10–28.43). This may be due to the fact that the more detailed the description, the less likely it is that it will have matching correspondences in the translating language. For long lists of objects, animals, or actions, etc., it is critical to understand the original *logic* of the list (e.g., unclean birds are those that eat meat with blood in it, or dead bodies, both of which are unclean as food) before trying to translate. And this is often not easy to do from a perspective so far removed in time and space from the original communication.

Finally, we want to emphasize that any list, whether it be of texts and passages, terms, or types of problematic issues, must always remain provisional. Moreover, we have to remember that these are lists of *possible* problem areas. In no way should these lists dictate *a priori* a hierarchy of priorities in checking, much less translation priorities. Nor should an unrealistic expectation of saving time be created. But lists of possible difficult texts and passages help us to remain alert as to which ones could be problematic in a translation project. What is always at stake is the quality of the translation.

Conclusion

So should consultants be encouraged to keep (and share) such lists of “problem passages”? As mentioned above, most consultants already keep lists of problem passages in mind when checking. Some consultants have compiled lists of *types of problems* encountered in translation, if not text and passage lists themselves. Others have used lists of *textual issues* (mostly in the Old Testament) to focus on textual problems that often result in translation

problems as well. Others have listed practical *elements in the translation process*. Still others have listed *portions* of the Bible that seem most important to them to publish in situations where there is no possibility of publishing a whole Bible. And many more have used the *biblical terms* tool in Paratext to get at the problem of finding obscure translation problems that are like needles in the textual haystack of the biblical text.

A list of texts and passages must always be flexible and respond to the needs of each particular project. That list should be of difficult, problematic texts and passages with a discussion of the problems therein, but should not result in a list of “cooked responses” to apply to all projects equally. It is tempting to try to include here a more or less definitive list or lists of difficult texts and passages (starting with the examples above), but the point remains that such lists are constrained by the biblical texts or the translating languages in question as much as they are by individual projects and the personnel involved.

Here are some principles for creating lists of difficult texts *based on the biblical texts and the culture and worldview represented by the translating language*:

1. They are the texts and passages that are most difficult for the people in the receptor communities to read (for example, lengthy descriptions of the tabernacle and temple with measurements and detailed specifications such as those of Exodus and Ezekiel).
2. They are those areas that are most loaded with subjectivity (poetry or picturesque narratives rich in metaphors and literary figures).
3. They are texts and passages that cause some theological controversy or that come with exegetical problems in the base text.
4. They are texts and passages that pose a challenge in terms of the structure and “thought” of the translating language: For example, each translating language encounters biblical terms that are difficult to translate because they are not part of that language’s repertoire (almond, chalice, etc.).

We have not discussed the “sharing” part of our title, but it is an aspect that is important for the development of the translating community. Consultants come from different backgrounds, both academic and cultural. An OT scholar may find an NT scholar’s list most helpful and vice versa. New consultants may find lists compiled by more experienced consultants helpful in identifying problems they have not yet come across. Lists from consultants in different countries could alert other consultants to cultural and linguistic matters with which they are still unfamiliar.

And finally, taking account of all the stakeholders involved in a translation can guide us in our use of particular passages in our biblical text checking. These would include the opinions and knowledge of at least the following groups:

1. Translators
2. Reviewers
3. Local communities and churches
4. Exegetes/consultants
5. National church and government agencies
6. National Bible Societies and partner Bible translation agencies
7. Donors and their intermediaries

In short, all project stakeholders must be involved, explicitly or implicitly, in the processes of translation, including in our use of lists of particular texts and passages for special consideration in quality assessment.

Internet resources

The following lists have been posted at the MAP (Modular Aggregation of Principles for Bible Translation) website.

1. List organized by types of problems encountered in translation: Harold Fehderau: <https://map.bloomfire.com/posts/623456-toward-systematic-translation-checking-procedures>
2. List organized by practical elements in the translation process: Anne Kompaoré: <https://map.bloomfire.com/posts/1234771-checklists-and-shorter-ots>
3. List of passages for a “shorter Old Testament”: Katy Barnwell: <https://map.bloomfire.com/posts/1234771-checklists-and-shorter-ots>

Abbreviations

GNB	Good New Bible (1976)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
LXX	Septuagint
NIV	New International Version (1978)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)