
At What Level Does Translation Occur?

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Abstract

In this paper, I ask the question, not what level (word, clause, discourse) a particular theory of translation addresses, but at what level translation occurs. I problematize the notion of levels of translation and explore, even if only briefly, how translation is an endeavor that spans the rank scale from word group to discourse and beyond.

Keywords

translation, rank, translation theory

Introduction

I am honored to make this contribution to recognize David Clark, who has distinguished himself over a number of years as an important contributor to the field of Bible translation, and in particular to *The Bible Translator*, one of the major venues for important work in the field. David has repeatedly demonstrated his concern for issues in translation, and this paper attempts to address one of these.

In a previous publication I outlined various levels at which different theories of translation function (Porter 2013, 173–209). I found that a number of the translational theories often used in various translations address different levels within language, ranging from the word/word group to the ideological context in which translation occurs. I still maintain that this analysis—while it may be arguable in individual instances—is correct regarding how various translation theories function. Some address the word group, others the clause, all the way up to the discourse and beyond.

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Thus, the issue of translation, or at least of the various types of translation technique, cannot be confined simply to a disagreement over literal vs. dynamic translation, as it is so often framed, especially within the field of biblical studies. Serious debate over how to extend this discussion further, by appreciating especially the higher levels of translation and the translation techniques that address those levels, requires much more discussion, but I do not wish to address that particular set of questions here. However, I do wish to use this previous analysis as the foundation for what I address in this paper, as a small tribute to David and the work that he has diligently done over the years for the cause of Bible translation. In this paper, I ask the question, not what level a particular theory of translation addresses, but at what level translation occurs. To anticipate my conclusion, I problematize the notion of levels of translation and explore, even if only briefly, how translation is an endeavor that spans the rank scale from word group to discourse and beyond.

The levels of translation

As noted in the introduction, one can develop a rank scale of linguistic levels that corresponds to the addressed target of various translational models. In previous work, I focused upon the levels of the word group, clause, clause complex, discourse, context of situation, and context of culture. In this paper, I wish to turn this description around and ask the question of at which level translation occurs.

For the sake of discussion, I consider the following text from the New Testament: *τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν εὐρηκέναι Ἀβραᾶμ τὸν προπάτορα ἡμῶν κατὰ σάρκα* (Rom 4.1). There are at least four plausible translations of this set of wordings.

- (1) “What therefore will we say that Abraham our forefather according to the flesh has found?” (NIV, NASB, HCSB)
- (2) “What will we say? We have found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh?” (Hays 1985)
- (3) “What will we say? Abraham our forefather has found something according to the flesh?”
- (4) “What will we say that we have found with respect to Abraham our forefather according to flesh?” (see Porter 2015, 103)¹

¹ I draw upon Systemic Functional Linguistics in this treatment, especially as described in Porter 2015, 24–35, as well as exemplified throughout the commentary. See the commentary for further argumentation regarding the levels discussed here.

Each one of these is a possible rendering of the wording of the Greek text (the last two my own). I will analyze this statement at a number of levels in an attempt to say something about the locus of translation.

Word and word group

There is, at least at first glance, a plausibility to each of the renderings on the basis of translation at the word or word group level. In other words, if we examine the initial interrogative pronoun *τί*, all of the translations agree that the word can and should be rendered “what.” A similar iconicity is to be found for a number of the other words that are found within the passage, with the result that we have nearly identical renderings of “we will say” *ἐροῦμεν* (I will address the issue of the question, which results in the English “will we say,” below), “found” as the general lexical meaning of the infinitive *εὐρηκέναι*, “Abraham,” “our forefather” *Ἀβραᾶμ τὸν προπάτορα ἡμῶν*, an agreement on the translation of a word group, and “according to (the) flesh” *κατὰ σάρκα* (I realize that whether the English includes the definite article, when Greek does not have an article, is problematic), another word group. In that regard, we may rightly say that the similar translations reflect at least a general similar understanding of the meaning of several of the Greek words and even word groups. That much appears to be clear.

If this is the case, however, how is it that the four translations vary so significantly? The first and fourth renderings consist of two complexed clauses each (both examples being questions), while the other two are each separate instances of clauses (both questions in each instance; see below for definition of clause and further discussion). The first translation renders the conjunction with “therefore,” whereas the other three do not include this in the rendering. Even though all four render the verb of saying as the finite verb of its clause and as a question, the same cannot be said of the perfect infinitive. It is rendered as if it were the main verb of a clause with Abraham as the subject (1 and 3) or as the complement of the verb of saying (and hence with the first-person plural) (4) or as the main verb of a subsequent question (2). As a result, “Abraham” and “our forefather” are syntactically construed differently. Abraham is a complement but of different types in the second and fourth renderings, but a subject in the first and third. Sometimes “Abraham” and “our forefather” are construed as elements in the same nominal group, with Abraham as the head (1, 3, and 4), but another time they are construed as separate word groups functioning as different clausal components.

In other words, as useful and even as significant as the renderings at the word or word group level are, there clearly is no way that simply interpreting or rendering at the word or word group level can result in a translation of the passage that is adequate to fulfil the translation task of presenting not just a rendering (that, of course, can be done) but one that identifies important translational questions and posits at least plausible translational answers. Those who hold to a literal or formal equivalence translational approach may contend that this is adequate to construe satisfactorily such passages (Ryken 2000; although I would contend that this is an overstatement that fails to recognize the importance of other levels of translational involvement), but clearly it is not a satisfactory approach to the larger question of identifying the level(s) at which translation takes place, as much still remains unsettled.

Clause and clause complex

The next level for consideration is the clause and the clause complex. The clause has figured significantly in the history and development of linguistics from a number of different perspectives. According to a number of (if not most) linguistic models, the clause is the maximal unit of structure and hence the maximal unit of structural analysis. It is also often construed as the maximal unit of meaning, in the sense that it is the largest structured unit of meaning, beyond which one must conceive of meaning being communicated in quite a different way. Clauses are often distinguished in hierarchy as primary–secondary or main–subordinate. The clause complex consists of a configuration of one or more clauses that are syntactically organized so as to create a relationship of dependency among them and thereby to form a larger semantic unit (note that in the discussion below I differentiate clause complexes as those groups of clauses with secondary or subordinate clauses). On the basis of this understanding, one could think that the clause would be the level at which most if not all of the major translational difficulties are resolved.

There are three ways to speak of the significance of the clause in relation to translation technique. The first is in relation to the clause as a linguistic entity, the second is in terms of the components of the clause, and the third is in relation to the clause as part of a complex of syntactically organized clauses. Even if we agree that we are going to retain the renderings of the words as noted above, we notice that the level of the clause is not entirely satisfactory for solving all of the translational issues identified in Rom 4.1. With reference to the clause as an entity, one of the major differences among the differing translations is whether the configuration of Greek words constitutes a single “clause” or two “clauses” (1 and 4 a single clause and 2

and 3 two clauses). With reference to the second issue, the components of the clause, several of the components are construed significantly differently, partly on the basis of the number of clauses identified within the Greek wording and partly on the basis of other questions clearly not solved by either word/word group or clause considerations. The result is major differences in syntax regarding subjects and complements and their respective predicates, as already identified above, as well as even how to construe some of the wordings as either constituents in a single or in two different word groups (“Abraham” and “our forefather”). With regard to the third issue, clause complexing, one of the above construals of the Greek does not have an explicit hierarchical relationship between the clauses (3), but the others all have hierarchical clausal relationships and hence clausal complexing, although in different configurations. The first and fourth consist of a primary and secondary clause of projection of the verb of saying. The second consists of two clause complexes, with the second containing an embedded clause (rendered in English with the infinitive “to be”). The dynamic or functional equivalent translational approach addresses the question of translation at the level of the clause (Nida 1964), and the functionalist translation approach addresses the level of the clause complex (Catford 1965). Since the clause is arguably the central component of many if not most linguistic models, one would expect it to be central to translation as well. Despite its centrality, the clause does not solve all of the translational difficulties.

Paragraph and paragraph complex

There is at least one other linguistic level between the clause/clause complex and the discourse, often called the paragraph, as well as possibly other levels that might be identified, depending upon how one wishes to organize discourse. For the sake of this paper, I will confine my comments to what might best be called the paragraph, that is, an intermediate unit of organization between the clause/clause complex and the discourse that itself may be formed into complexes of paragraphs within larger organizational units. However, I also realize that discussion of the level of the paragraph might well fall within what might better be called discourse translation, as the paragraph constitutes one of the major organizational units within a discourse. I will limit my comments to considerations within the paragraph, which appears to run from Rom 4.1-12 (the second paragraph being 4.13-25). Romans 4.1 marks the beginning of a new paragraph, as indicated by a number of factors. These include the conjunction “therefore” (where it is translated), the introduction of a new participant, Abraham, and the use of a question as the first of a series of questions about Abraham. Even though we have been able to provide lexical equivalents for many if not most of the

lexemes within the Greek wording, we still have not been able to resolve the issue of whether this wording indicates one or two Greek questions, and how such different construals affect the syntactical issues already noted.

We must go beyond the first verse to suggest the beginnings of an answer to this set of problems. The clausal punctuation and construal of the grammar are affected by how one interprets at the paragraph level the series of questions and whether the interlocutor implied by the dialogical exchange is a Jew or a Gentile. The first, third, and fourth renderings offered above imply that the interlocutor is a Jew, while the second (by suggesting a change in the perceived relationship between Abraham and the interlocutor) implies that the interlocutor is a Gentile. On the basis of the clause or clause complex alone, such a distinction cannot be made—in fact probably cannot even be raised because it lacks sufficient context. For a suggested resolution, we must turn to Paul's next statement in Rom 4.2: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has a reason for boasting, but still not to God," a subject Paul then explores more fully throughout the rest of the paragraph (and beyond) in terms of Abraham's accomplishments not being legal ones but ones based on faith. This opening dialogical exchange of question and response suggests that the interlocutor is a Jew. The answer also suggests that the fourth of the renderings above is the most appropriate construal of the Greek wording. In other words, Paul in effect is saying this: "What will we (or I, since the speaker is Paul using the plural) say that we have indeed found regarding Abraham, our forefather in the flesh?" someone might ask. "For if Abraham was justified by works, he would have grounds of human boasting, but not boasting to God." So far as Abraham's boasting in his earthly accomplishments, he would have had such a basis, but the basis is not human accomplishment, as Paul continues in Rom 4.3 on the basis of Scripture.

The examination at the paragraph level helps to clarify a number of the contextual issues regarding understanding Rom 4.1. The question is not simply what Abraham found (1) or even that he has found something (3). The question is what Abraham found in his human dimension, that is, regarding his human accomplishments worthy of boasting about. However, the paragraph level of analysis also does not answer a number of questions. It does not answer the question of why Paul is concerned with boasting or why he has selected Abraham for discussion (and later David within the same paragraph; see Rom 4.6-8) or why he has chosen to discuss Abraham (or David) at this particular place within his argument or why he thinks that he needs to ask questions about him.

In fact, on the basis of the word/word group, clause/clause complex, and even paragraph/paragraph complex levels, the invocation of Abraham may

be nothing more than a transliteration of the Greek wording and then a teasing out of the argument found within the paragraph. Something is said about a participant named Abraham, without necessarily knowing the significance of this participant either within the discourse or beyond. To my knowledge, there is no translational theory that focuses upon the paragraph, even though the paragraph (or something like it) constitutes one of the essential units (and possibly even structures) within a discourse.

Discourse

The level of discourse is the highest linguistic level that can be described, and has an important but underestimated and often unrecognized role to play in translational practice and in translation theory itself. The discourse constitutes the largest linguistic unit and provides the maximal linguistic context for any instance of language usage within it. The importance of discourse for translation may be appreciated through both top-down and bottom-up approaches to discourse. The analysis in this paper has taken a bottom-up approach, beginning with the word/word group and working upwards to the level of discourse. There are a number of discourse analytical models that approach language in the same way, building up their discourse structures from the accumulation of smaller units into units of ever-increasing size: words form sentences form paragraphs form discourses (in simplified form). There are other discourse models that take a top-down approach, beginning with various higher levels, such as context or meaning or even discourse itself, and working from this higher level down to the individual elements below.

This paper has taken what so far appears to be a bottom-up approach because translational issues have traditionally begun at the bottom levels, with disputes over matters of formal equivalence. However, we have seen that such an approach cannot solve many of the most important translational questions. The need to appeal to higher levels has resulted in reaching the level of discourse. Therefore, the discourse itself acts as both a constraint and a productive environment for construal of instances of language within it.

The discourse factors for understanding the translational issues of Rom 4.1 are several. These include the parameters of the discourse itself, the discourse structure, and its internal organization, and how these larger level organizational principles govern the discourse. This discourse displays several layers of structure. Within the main body of the argument of the letter, the initial movement seems to be about establishing the nature of the human predicament and its law-based solution (Rom 1.18–4.25). The first part of this unit discusses human sinfulness (Rom 1.18–2.11), followed by discussion of the law of God (Rom 2.12–3.20), and then the solution to the

human condition (Rom 3.21–4.25). Discussion of the solution to the human condition falls into three parts, the first being God’s righteousness (Rom 3.21–26), the second the exclusion of boasting (Rom 3.27–31), and the third the example of Abraham (Rom 4.1–25). This last section consists of the two paragraphs mentioned in the previous section, what one might call a paragraph complex focused upon Abraham (with some mention of David in the first of the two).

Once we understand the structure of the overall argument and its internal composition, we can see that the invocation of Abraham (and David) follows within the discussion of the human condition in relation to God’s righteousness. In light of who God is, Paul says, boasting is excluded. For some reason (that will become apparent in discussion of context below), Abraham constitutes a good example of what Paul is saying, especially about the exclusion of boasting, and this leads him to ask questions about Abraham in relation to this boasting. The importance of Paul’s argument seems to be based upon Abraham experiencing his “faith” before he did something that would merit boasting (his circumcision). This reinforces the understanding of the fourth rendering as the most appropriate in light of the fact that it raises the question in direct response to the issue of boasting and Abraham’s actions as a human being, something that is dealt with further in the rest of the paragraph, as well as the paragraph complex.

Despite the importance of discourse considerations for translation, we can see that even the discourse itself does not answer important questions regarding the translation. These include the significance of asking questions rather than making statements in Paul’s response, as well as the question of who Abraham (along with David) is, apart from being simply a participant within the discourse itself. There have been a number of discourse analytical approaches to translation (e.g., Hatim and Mason 1990), and these have added significantly to understanding the translation process, because they have continually brought to the fore that any translation is made at a particular linguistic place within a discourse, but a place that is influenced by cotext; that is, what has preceded and what follows that place.

Situational context

I have avoided using the term “context” in discussion of the linguistic environment of a work, instead choosing to use the term “cotext.” This is probably a better way to refer to the linguistic environment than the terms “literary” or “immediate” context, terms often used. The literary context extends beyond the parameters of the discourse itself and immediate context seems to imply simply or even only the few words on either side, whereas much more is involved in the cotext, up to the parameters of the entire

discourse. However, there is more that must be taken into account than the discourse itself, as the discourse is a product of a linguistic context (and a material situation, but that is beyond discussion here). The notion of context is an admittedly abstract one, but it indicates the non-linguistic environment in which texts are created and interpreted.

In this paper, I distinguish between two types of context, situational context and cultural context. I will treat situational context first in this section. A discourse is the realization of a context of situation. In other words, there is a situational environment out of which a text is created by the meaningful acts of its creator using the resources of the language. I find it useful, within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, to define the context of situation in terms of three constituents: field, tenor, and mode (Porter 2015, 27–35). Field is concerned with the “what”-ness of a text, tenor the “who”-ness, and mode the “how”-ness. The field indicates what a text is about and it includes who is doing what to whom and in what way. The tenor indicates what the various textually external and internal relationships are among the participants within the discourse. The mode is how language is used to convey all of these meanings of what and who to the reader.

Each text has its own contextual configuration based upon its field, tenor, and mode. Paul’s letter to the Romans is a church letter written to be read aloud, about Christian salvation (in this case, a complex argument regarding human relationship to God, moving from the human situation through the resolution of this situation in reconciliation, the Christian life in the Spirit, and then how to act upon such instruction), involving Paul and the Roman Christians. However, there are various common or similar contextual configurations, and these contexts generate texts that have typical characteristics in common with each other, what is often called a register of language use.

The ancient letter was such a type of entity that realized the need to communicate various meanings between those who were at a distance from each other. The early Christian apostle, Paul, was a literary innovator, and developed the traditional three-part ancient letter form to a five-part form to expand his meaning potential. He adapted the opening, body, and closing form of the letter by developing the places of intersection of the letter form. The result was the opening, thanksgiving, body, parenthesis, and closing that Paul often uses in his letters (though not invariably, as is seen in Galatians and 1 Timothy). The fact that the language we are construing in Rom 4.1 is a letter, and that this letter has the contextual configuration that it does, has many implications for translation, a number of them already noted above.

There are many other features of letters, and Paul’s letters in particular, that I could discuss in relation to the translational example I am discussing.

I will concentrate upon one of them, as it has the most obvious impact on the matter of translation. The tenor of discourse is realized by the interpersonal metafunction, and one of the components of the interpersonal metafunction is the attitude and speech functions system. This system is concerned with the relations of the participants and hence with such configurations as declarations and various types of questions, among others. In the section above on clause/clause complexes, we discussed the lexicogrammatical realization of some of these semantic categories in the τ -question² (“what will we say?”) and the possibility of an open question (see Porter 2016). The semantic and lexicogrammatical strata are clausally realized, but the question of the meaningful use of the speech functions is one that originates in the context of situation. The tenor relations of Paul’s letter involves his writing to Roman Christians whom he has not met, and he chooses to convey his meanings by means of interrogation. Thus, we see that Paul’s use of the question and answer technique in Rom 4, beginning in 4.1, is in fact a continuation of a technique to form participant relations that he uses throughout Romans. The result is a means by which Paul as author positions himself in relationship to his Christian readers, but also within the discourse in relation to other hypothetical respondents that he linguistically creates. There have been several translational techniques that address contextual issues, including relevance theory and its concern for processing effort as an indication of relevance (Gutt 2010), descriptivist approaches and their concern with literature in context (Hermans 1999), and skopos theory and its attention to purpose in context (Nord 2005). These approaches are all top-down approaches to translation, however, and are not always as attuned to the lower levels of realization in linguistic substance.

Cultural context

The final level of analysis is cultural context. Cultural context is probably the most widely ignored dimension of translation, since cultural context pervasively surrounds and even permeates and embodies all dimensions of translation, from the source text to the target text, including the translator. It is therefore assumed rather than recognized and understood. There have been various attempts to systematize cultural context, but so far these have been elusive. The context of culture encompasses the culturally based semiotic systems (systems of knowledge) that provide the originating environment for the creation of meanings and their instantiations in texts. Such knowledge includes all of the various systems of knowledge within a

² This term is based on the use of *tau* words for questions in Greek (equivalent to Wh-questions in English).

culture. This would entail its literary and linguistic knowledge that is realized in various types of texts that are used for various social and cultural purposes, historical knowledge regarding the significant events and figures that have influenced a culture, and of course religious knowledge, including what a culture thinks or believes about God and humans and their relationships. In other words, one cannot approach the task of translation without attempting to understand both the cultural context of the source text and the cultural context in which one translates the target text (and of the translator).

The necessary recognition of cultural context is clear in the example from Rom 4.1, to the point of affecting our understanding of some of the basic questions regarding our renderings. Paul's use of question and answer would have been recognized by his ancient readers as a form of diatribe, an ancient dialogical interrogation used to tease out and discover knowledge. Its use may not resolve whether one or two questions are asked by Paul, but it explains why Paul may have used such a technique especially at this juncture in his argument. Another example is Paul's appeal to Abraham (and David). Abraham was the forefather of the Jewish people, one who represented a paragon of spiritual virtue in his relationship to God. Paul appeals to him as an example—another form of ancient rhetoric, the *exemplum*, in which a significant figure was invoked for illustrative purposes—as he does to David to give seriousness to the foundation of his argument. Finally, even the question we asked above, regarding whether Paul was interrogating a Jew or Gentile hearer in his posited question (or questions), reflects the ancient context of the Jewish people living within the environment of Diaspora Judaism of the postexilic period.

There have been some recent translational theorists who have brought increasingly to our attention the importance of cultural knowledge for translation. This has emphasized the need to resist the urge to subordinate and culturally constrain the text by the modern world and instead to retain its ancient features so as to make us continually cognizant that the source text was not originally written directly to us, but is mediated through an ancient language (Venuti 1995).

Conclusion

I conclude this small token of esteem for the continual and diligent work of David Clark by returning to the major question posed by this paper. At what level does translation occur? There are a variety of approaches to translation that offer a range of suggestions, but in the final analysis, there is no single linguistic or extra-linguistic level at which translation occurs. Translation, if it is to consider all of the elements that it needs to weigh in order to arrive at

an estimable conclusion (even the translation of a single verse), must move up and down the rank of appropriate levels, from the word/word group to the cultural context, and all levels in between, because each one offers significance for description and translation. Few translational decisions can be made simply on the basis of a single level, or even on the basis of just a few levels, but a robust translation requires consideration of the entire rank scale. The consideration and development of further translational models require that all of these factors be recognized and taken into consideration.

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Abbreviations

- HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
NASB New American Standard Version (1995)
NIV New International Version (1978)