

On Translating the Impersonal First-Person Plural

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the translation of a subset of impersonal constructions that has been called the reference impersonal. A Bible translator will encounter reference impersonals in the source text. In translation the target language may also require the use of impersonal constructions even when they are not present in the source text. The paper focuses on the reference impersonal first-person plural (I_{PL}) in Magar Kham, a language spoken in mid-western Nepal, which tends to use the I_{PL} for a generic or referentially unspecified group of people. This impersonal I_{PL} often occurs in conjunction with the phrase *mī-rā* “man-PL.” Generally, the impersonal I_{PL} implies that the speaker identifies with the referent(s). The paper also demonstrates that though the reference impersonal I_{PL} and the personal I_{PL} both use the same pronoun and morphology per se, due to pragmatic constraints only the personal counterpart can occur in the singular.

Keywords

reference impersonal, defocusing, generic human reference, first-person plural

1. Introduction

During the past several years, there has been considerable linguistic research into impersonal constructions, both in Indo-European languages and recently also in other language families. In the literature, the term “impersonal” has been used for a variety of constructions ranging from the lack of a grammatical subject (i.e., from a structural perspective) to vague or

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defocused reference (i.e., from a semantic perspective) (cf. Langacker 2006, 133–34; Siewierska 2008, 116; Fernández 2013, 89–90). Morphologically marked impersonals are also found in some languages (Payne 2011).

In an impersonal construction the addressee is non-deictic: the addressees are not (necessarily) engaged in the speech act.¹ Vague or defocused reference implies that the referent is only partially identifiable, for example, a generic human referent “humankind,” or an unspecified group of people, as in the case of a nation as a whole. Such constructions are also called “reference impersonals” or “R-impersonals” (Siewierska 2011). Context is crucial in determining what the correct referent is in any given situation (cf. Posio 2012; Nunberg 1993). For example, the 1PL pronoun in (1) is understood as “humankind,” and the 3PL pronoun in (2) implies the complete set of Finnish nationals (or, more generally, Finland as a country).

- (1) We have misused the world’s resources.
- (2) They have lakes in Finland.

It is the reference impersonal 1PL shown in (1) that will be considered in this paper. Section 2 will overview the reference impersonal in more detail and discuss two impersonal constructions found in the Taka variety of Magar Kham, a Tibeto-Burman (Central Himalayan) language spoken in the Eastern Rukum district of mid-western Nepal (ISO 639-3 kjl). Impersonal constructions in Ancient and Koine Greek will also be briefly mentioned. Section 3 will consider the translation of this type of impersonal in Magar Kham. Section 4 will look at the pragmatic restraints involved when converting an impersonal 1PL to a personal 1SG, using a translation of the Nicene Creed as a platform for discussion.

2. Linguistic preliminaries

2.1 Reference impersonals

Reference impersonals are used for defocusing or for reducing referentiality (Langacker 2006; Siewierska 2011). As shown in (1), the 1PL does not refer to the speaker and his or her immediate addressee(s), but to a wider group of referentially unspecified human beings. Along similar lines, Dixon (2009, 205) comments on Acehnese (Austronesian), where the 1PL inclusive pronoun is used in an impersonal sense for “general truths about human activity or behaviour.”

Of particular importance is the speaker’s identification with the referent(s). When a speaker uses an impersonal 1PL, she or he identifies with the set of possible referents. Conversely, when using a 3PL impersonal as

¹ The relationship of impersonal constructions to the inclusive/exclusive 1PL distinction found in some languages is discussed in Section 3.

in (2), the speaker excludes him- or herself from the group (cf. Siewierska 2004, 2011; Borthen 2010; Posio and Vilkuna 2013).

The distribution of reference impersonals in the world's languages has not been fully determined, partly because language descriptions (especially of non-European languages) have not always paid attention to the feature (cf. Siewierska 2004, 211). Nevertheless, a widespread occurrence in the world's languages has been reported (Kitagawa and Lehrer 1990; Siewierska 2008, 125; 2011, 68–69). These include the Tibeto-Burman rGyalrongic (cf. Sun 2005) and Kirāt languages, the latter of which belong to the same Central Himalayan branch of Tibeto-Burman as Magar Kham, which is described in the following section.

2.2 Impersonals in Magar Kham

Watters (2002, 166, 251) maintains that the Magar Kham impersonal passive functions as the equivalent of the English generic pronoun “one.” As shown in (3), the impersonal passive is formed by means of the detransitivising morpheme *-si* “DTRS” followed by imperfective morphology. Note that (Tibeto-Burman) rGyalrong also uses the detransitivising prefix *sa-* “DTRS” for the impersonal passive construction (Sun 2005). The passive syntax has demoted the agent and the logical patient is in focus.

- (3) Magar Kham impersonal passive (Watters 2002, 251)

giddə sjakəri ma-kəi-si-i

vulture meat NEG-eat-DTRS-IMPV

“Vulture meat is not eaten.” (general truth)

However, in Magar Kham (3) can also be expressed in two other ways: either as a reference impersonal 1_{PL} (4) or a reference impersonal 3_{PL} (5). Note that there is a tendency for the word *m̃-ra* “man-PL” to be used with a generic human referent (compare with *kəŋʰjoʔ* “person, human” in rGyalrong impersonals, Sun 2005; *gente* “people” in European Portuguese, Posio 2012).

- (4) *ge m̃-ra-e giddə sjakəri ge-ma-kəi-e*

1_{PL}[PRO] man-PL-ERG vulture meat 1_{PL}[AGT]-NEG-eat-IMPV

“We people do not eat vulture meat.” (general truth)

- (5) *m̃-ra-e giddə sjakəri ma-kəi-rə*

man-PL-ERG vulture meat NEG-eat-3_{PL}[AGT]

“People do not eat vulture meat.” (general truth)

The choice of 1PL or 3PL for the Magar Kham reference impersonal appears to be dependent on the speaker's *identification* or *association* with the referent. In the generally accepted proposition (4), the speaker intentionally includes him- or herself among the referents. Conversely, in (5) the speaker either distances him- or herself from the referents or indicates indifference. This observation is aligned with Kuno and Kaburaki's (1977, 628) concept of empathy: "Empathy is the speaker's identification, with varying degrees . . . , with a person who participates in the event that he describes in a sentence." In the same terms, Posio (2012) maintains that the 1PL is often used when "the speaker empathizes with the intended referent."

Note also that Magar Kham permits 1PL or 3PL impersonal participants not only in the SU/AGT² position as above, but also in the DO/PAT position. Example (6) is the equivalent of "Saviour" in Magar Kham, which, due to the lack of an appropriate noun, resorts to a non-finite verb.

- (6) *ge* *mĩ-ra-lai* *bãtsai-zja-o*
 1PL[PRO] man-PL-ACC save-CONT-NML
 "(the one who) saves us people" (generic reference)

2.3 Impersonals in Ancient and Koine Greek

Impersonal constructions are found in both Ancient and Koine Greek with several impersonal verb types: weather verbs (such as βρέχω "to rain" in Jas 5.9), some modals (such as δεῖ "to be necessary"), and third-singular medio-passives (such as συνεφωνήθη "agreed" in Acts 5.9) (BDF; Porter 1994; Dahl 2013). Dahl (2013) describes these constructions from a structural perspective in that they have "no expressed or contextually retrievable subject argument" or have "an oblique subject-like argument not showing agreement with the verb form."

Closer to the current topic of semantically defined reference impersonals are the grammaticalized 3PL forms in *verba dicendi* (verbs of speaking) such as λέγουσι or φασι "(they) say" (Dahl 2013; BDF). Furthermore, Dahl (2013) mentions that in Ancient Greek the 2SG can be used in the sense of the impersonal passive, akin to the English generic pronoun "one." According to BDF (72, 147), due to the influence of Aramaic, it is more common in Koine Greek to find the 3PL used for the generic subject, sometimes in conjunction with οἱ ἄνθρωποι "people" (such as ποιῶσιν . . . οἱ ἄνθρωποι "men . . . do" in Luke 6.31).

² Grammatical abbreviations, found in small capitals, are explained at the end of this article.

3. Translation of the impersonal 1PL in Magar Kham

In addition to the impersonal constructions in Greek outlined in Section 2.3, it is not uncommon in the Greek New Testament to find the 1PL pronoun being used in a reference impersonal sense (with corresponding 1PL morphology).³ Consider, for example, the 1PL's in the following examples from the Pauline and Johannine Epistles. In (7) the intended reference is to all Christians, and in (8) to all humankind.

- (7) ἡ παρρησία ἣν ἔχομεν πρὸς αὐτὸν “the boldness we have in him”
(1 John 5.14)
- (8) πάντας ἡμᾶς φανερωθῆναι δεῖ ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ βήματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ
“all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor 5.10)

Cases such as (7)–(8) have been commented on in previous publications, sometimes in the context of the 1PL inclusive (Lofthouse 1955; Pickett 1964; Filbeck 1994; cf. also Wallace 1996; Porter 1994). Pickett (1964, 91–92) and Filbeck (1994, 406–8) find that in languages with a morphological inclusive–exclusive distinction, what is described in this paper as a reference impersonal is a generic extension of the 1PL inclusive. Distinguishing between the impersonal and the inclusive can indeed be difficult, as Posio (2012) also notes. In Magar Kham, however, unlike in the related Kirāt languages (cf. LaPolla 2003), there is no morphological inclusive–exclusive distinction, and thus the construction should be described in different terms.

Since Magar Kham uses the 1PL for impersonal reference, the translation of (7)–(8) is straightforward, as demonstrated in (9)–(10), respectively.

- (9) Magar Kham translation of (7)

<i>o-ŋa-kə</i>	<i>ma-tsʰe:-də</i>	<i>zə</i>	<i>ba-nja</i>
3SG[POSS]-face-LOC	NEG-fear-CVB	EMPH	go-INF
<i>ge-jũ</i>	<i>hup-nja</i>	<i>le</i>	
1PL[POSS]-heart	be_confident-INF	be	
“our heart (which) goes without fear before him is confident”			

³ The Greek text of the New Testament in this section is taken from UBS4. English translations follow NRSV. Where necessary, more literal renderings are offered in brackets following the NRSV translation. The Magar Kham translations follow MK1985 and MK2016. All Magar Kham examples have been transcribed following the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) conventions.

(10) Magar Kham translation of (8)

ge bəri paĩ tə-tsʰa kʰris-e o-ŋq-kə
 1PL[PRO] all all one-day Christ-GEN 3SG[POSS]-face-LOC

tsjã:si-də pʰal-si-u pəri-ri-zja
 stand-CVB judge-DTRS-NML need-FUT-CONT

“One day all of us need to stand before Christ to be judged”

However, consider (11)–(13) where there is no 1PL in the source text:

(11) τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ “the human spirit that is within”
 (1 Cor 2.11)

(12) μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων “mediator between God and mankind”
 (1 Tim 2.5)

(13) κατὰ ἄνθρωπον “from daily life” (lit. “on the basis of a person”)
 (Gal 3.15)

In cases such as (11)–(13) where “people” or “human” is referred to in a generic sense, in Magar Kham there is a tendency to use the 1PL in conjunction with the phrase *mĩ-rə* “man-PL” (14)–(16).

(14) Magar Kham translation of (11)

ge mĩ-rə bə ge-kjã-ta-o purus-e
 1PL[PRO] man-PL also 1PL[POSS]-body-ES-NML spirit-ERG
 “As is with us people, (the) spirit (which is) in our bodies . . .”

(15) Magar Kham translation of (12)

ge mĩ-ra-lai pərmeswor-sə sə-kʰəi-nja ge-tjala
 1PL[PRO] man-PL-ACC God-ASC TRS-be_ 1PL[POSS]-
 reconciled-INF mediator
 “(the) mediator (who) reconciles us people with God”

(16) Magar Kham translation of (13)

ge mĩ-ra-e ge-tsələn-ni
 1PL[PRO] man-PL-GEN 1PL[POSS]-habit/custom-ABL
 “according to (the) habit/custom of us people”

As noted in Section 2.2, the speaker's identification with the referent is one of the key factors motivating the use of the 1PL versus the 3PL in Magar Kham. In (14)–(16) the speaker is included in the set of unspecified 1PL referents. Conversely, the speaker may exclude him- or herself from the referents, or distance or disengage him- or herself from the proposition by using the 3PL instead of the 1PL. For example, in (18) the disengagement is necessary due to the final judgement mentioned in the last clause of the same verse (19)–(20).

- (17) ἕκαστος δὲ πειράζεται ὑπὸ τῆς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας ἐξελκόμενος καὶ δελεαζόμενος· **εἴτα ἡ ἐπιθυμία συλλαβοῦσα τίκει ἁμαρτίαν** “But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; **then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin**” (Jas 1.14-15a)

- (18) Magar Kham translation of Jas 1.15a

nə-ni zə ja-jũ-la-o ma-tsao pã-e
that-ABL EMPH 3PL-heart-IN-NML NEG-good thing-ERG

ma-tsao jən bə dzərməi-zja-o
NEG-good work also give_birth-CONT-3SG[AGT]

“By means of that, the evil thing in their heart also gives birth to an evil deed”

- (19) ἡ δὲ ἁμαρτία ἀποτελεσθεῖσα ἀποκύει θάνατον “and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (Jas 1.15b)

- (20) Magar Kham translation of (19)

nəkin no ma-tsao jən o-jo:-wo-tə
then that NEG-good work 3SG[AGT]-be_fulfilled-NML-ES

si-nja sədza-lə dzə:-wo do-zja-o
die-INF punishment-IN put-NML AUX[CAUS]-CONT-3SG[AGT]

“then after that evil deed is fulfilled, it puts (them) into the punishment of death”

A second example where the context restricts the use of the impersonal 1PL is 2 Cor 5.19. In the Greek of 2 Cor 5.1-10, Paul uses an impersonal 1PL in general reference to believers, that is, those who have been given “the Spirit as a guarantee” (v. 5). However, in 2 Cor 5.19 (as in vv. 11-14), the 1PL refers in an exclusive sense to either Paul alone, or to Paul and his close associates and/or the other apostles. Thus, though κόσμος “world” in (21) would be expressed naturally in Magar Kham by means of the impersonal phrase *ge mĩ-rə* “we people,” the translation necessarily resorts to the 3PL (22).

- (21) ὥς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ **κόσμον** καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ, μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν καὶ θέμενος ἐν ἡμῖν τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς “that is, in Christ God was reconciling **the world** to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5.19)

- (22) Magar Kham translation of (21)

pəmeswor kʰris-ni hu-də
God Christ-INSTR come-CVB

ao manuwa-ta-o mĩ-ra-lai ja-pap-rə
this world-ES-NML people-PL-ACC 3PL[POSS]-sin-PL

tsiu:-də ma-ja-də
look-CVB NEG-BEN-CVB

ol-sə ja-sə-kʰəi-hu-kj-o
3SG[PRO]-ASC 3PL[PAT]-TRS-be_reconciled-come-PRF-3SG[AG]

“God, by (means of) Christ coming, not looking at their sins, he reconciled the people of this world with himself.”

no pã sə-tʰəi-nja pʰəri
that word TRS-hear-INF again

ol pəmeswor zə ge-lai
3SG[PRO] God EMPH 1PL[PRO]-ACC

dzəi-də nəi-si-u
make-CVB AUX[PRF]-1PL[PAT]-NML

“As for proclaiming that word, (it was) God himself (who) appointed us.”

4. Testing the boundaries

An interesting feature of an impersonal 1PL is that the 1PL can be changed to a (personal) 1SG morpho-syntactically, but pragmatically it cannot (necessarily) be. Hence, (24) below is grammatically correct, but at the same time, it is somewhat odd because it lacks the global aspect of the proposition evident in (23). Interestingly, in some languages impersonal constructions have been found to avoid stating the responsibility of a *singular* referent (cf. Langacker 2006, 134–35; Givón 2001, 323–24).

- (23) We have misused the world's resources. (reference to the human race)
 (24) (?) I have misused the world's resources.

Attempting to translate the Nicene Creed into both 1_{PL} and 1_{SG} formulas provides a useful platform for testing this observation. The Nicene Creed has not been available in Magar Kham, and it was translated for this paper for theoretical purposes.

Unlike the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, as a primarily conciliar symbol of faith, is generally considered to be a confession made by the church as a unified entity (WCC 1991, 15; Kelly 1999, 256), and thus originally it was developed in the 1_{PL} (25).

- (25) Πιστεύομεν “We believe”

Note that the creed also contains an overt impersonal 1_{PL} which refers to humanity in general (26).

- (26) δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν “for us people and for our salvation”

The 1_{PL}'s in (25) and (26) are impersonal. In (25), the speaker identifies him- or herself with the members of the group who are also citing the creed (cf. “mass speaking” in Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990, 201–5), and also all members of the Christian church in a global sense who confess to the content of the creed. In (26), the 1_{PL} refers to humankind.

Translating the 1_{PL} into Magar Kham in (25) along the lines described in Section 2.2 is straightforward (27). Furthermore, the Greek ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους “we people” is akin to the Magar Kham construction for generic human reference demonstrated in (14)–(16), and hence translating the 1_{PL} in (26) in this context is also unproblematic (28). (Note, however, that the 3_{PL} in the subordinate clause in (28) is coreferential with 1_{PL} in the main clause.)

- (27) Proposed Magar Kham translation of (25)

<i>ge</i>	<i>ge-jũ</i>	<i>hub-o</i>	<i>zə</i>	<i>li-zja</i>
1 _{PL} [PRO]	1 _{PL} [POSS]-heart	be_confident-NML	EMPH	be-CONT

“Our heart is confident”

- (28) Proposed Magar Kham translation of (26)

<i>ge</i>	<i>mĩ-ra-lai</i>	<i>tsao</i>	<i>ta-nja-e</i>	<i>dzũni</i>
1 _{PL} [PRO]	man-PL-ACC	good	become-INF-GEN	for_the_sake of

“So that good would come to us people,”

o-bātsi-rə-kə *li-də*
DUM-be_saved-3PL-OPT be-CVB(COMPL) ~ ‘saying’
“(and so that) they may be saved” (= co-referential with the 1PL of the main clause)

However, there are cases where the Magar Kham translation would need to add further impersonal 1PL’s. For example, in the beginning of Article III of the creed, an impersonal 1PL is required to overtly state the scope of the Holy Spirit’s rule. Therefore, the translation would render τὸ Κύριον in (29) as *ge-ηḡj-ta-o* (1PL-head-ES-NML) which is, literally, “(the one) over our heads” (30). Likewise, in the translation of τὸ ζῳοποιόν which follows in the creed (31), it is also necessary to state the beneficiaries of the life given by the Holy Spirit, hence the impersonal 1PL in (32).

(29) Καὶ εἰς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον, τὸ Κύριον “And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord”

(30) Proposed Magar Kham translation of (29)

tsʰḡjwo *purus-lai* *bə* *ge-jũ* *hub-o*
pure spirit-ACC also 1PL[POSS]-heart be_confident-NML

zə *li-zja*
EMPH be-CONT

“Our heart is also confident about/in the Pure Spirit.”

ol *ge-ηḡj-ta-o* *zə*
3SG[PRO] 1PL[POSS]-head-ES-NML EMPH

“He (is the one who) rules (over) us.”

(31) τὸ ζῳοποιόν “the giver of life”

(32) Proposed Magar Kham translation of (31)

ge-lai *dzuni* *ja-zja-o* *bə* *ol* *zə*
1PL[PRO]-ACC life give-CONT-NML also 3SG[PRO] EMPH

“(It is) also he (who) gives life to us.”

This said, though the original Greek version of the Nicene Creed is in 1PL, its Latin translation has also had a 1SG formula as a baptismal confession since the sixth century A.D. Thus, in Latin, there is a long-standing tradition for two formulas: the 1PL *Credimus* “We believe” (Pelikan and Hotchkiss 2003, 158–63), and the 1SG *Credo* “I believe” (e.g., *Missale Romanum*, 3rd edition, 2002).

If the Nicene Creed is translated into Magar Kham with the 1_{SG} in accordance with the Latin singular tradition, the 1_{PL} in (27) could be rendered as 1_{SG} (33). However, the impersonal reference in (30) and (32) must remain in the 1_{PL}, because it would sound unnaturally individualistic in the 1_{SG}. Thus, in (35) both the 1_{SG} and the 1_{PL} are present.

- (33) Proposed Magar Kham translation of (25) in the 1sg formula

<i>ŋa</i>	<i>ŋa-jũ</i>	<i>hub-o</i>	<i>zə</i>	<i>li-zja</i>
1SG[PRO]	1SG[POSS]-heart	be_confident-NML	EMPH	be-CONT
‘My heart is confident’				

- (34) Καὶ εἰς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον, τὸ Κύριον, τὸ ζωοποιόν “And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life”

- (35) Proposed Magar Kham translation of (34) in the 1sg formula

<i>ts^həjwo</i>	<i>purus-lai</i>	<i>bə</i>	<i>ŋa-jũ</i>	<i>hub-o</i>	<i>zə</i>	<i>li-zja</i>
pure	spirit-ACC	also	1SG[POSS]- heart	be_confident- NML	EMPH	be-CONT

“My heart is also confident about/in the Pure Spirit.”

<i>ol</i>	<i>ge-ŋəj-ta-o</i>	<i>zə</i>
3SG[PRO]	1PL[POSS]-head-ES-NML	EMPH
‘‘He (is the one who) rules (over) us.’’		

ge-lai dzuni ja-zja-o bə ol zə
 1PL[PRO]-ACC life give-CONT-NML also 3SG[PRO] EMPH
 ‘(It is) also he (who) gives life to us.’

5. Summary

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss the translation of reference impersonals. Particular attention has been given to the reference impersonal 1PL where the reference in the 1PL is vague or defocused: “we” in reference to a non-deictic, loosely defined group of people.

Two impersonal constructions have been identified in Magar Kham. The first is the impersonal passive described by Watters (2002), the second is the reference impersonal described in this paper. The paper maintains that there is a tendency for a speaker to use the impersonal 1PL when she or he identifies with the referent. Conversely, if the speaker wishes to distance or disengage him- or herself from the referent, the speaker is more likely to use the 3PL.

This necessarily has a bearing on translation. The Greek text of the New Testament itself contains overt reference impersonal 1PLS. The paper

demonstrates cases in Magar Kham where the language requires the addition of further reference impersonals in the translation.

Finally, the pragmatics of the impersonal 1PL are tested by translating the Nicene Creed into Magar Kham in both 1PL and 1SG formulas. It was found that while the personal 1PL can be substituted by the 1SG, the impersonal 1PL cannot.⁴

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Grammatical abbreviations

1	first person	AUX	auxiliary
3	third person	BEN	benefactor
ABL	ablative	CAUS	causative
ACC	accusative	COMPL	complement
AGT	agent	CONT	continuous aspect
ASC	associative	CVB	converb

DAT	dative	LOC	locative
DO	direct object	NEG	negative
DTRS	detransitiviser	NML	nominal
DUM	dummy prefix	OPT	optative
EMPH	emphatic	PAT	patient
ERG	ergative	PL	plural
ES	essive	POSS	possessive
GEN	genitive	PRO	pronoun
IMPFV	imperfective aspect	SG	singular
IN	inessive	SU	subject
INF	infinitive	TRS	transitiviser
INSTR	instrumental		

Other abbreviations

BDF	Blass and Debrunner 1961 (in References)
MK1985	Magar Kham: New Testament (1985)
MK2016	Magar Kham: New Testament (2016)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
UBS4	UBS Greek New Testament, 4th edition
WCC	World Council of Churches