

QUALITY IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

POSITION PAPER BY COTP

The UBS Committee on Translation Policies has among its tasks “to promote the maintenance of agreed upon UBS quality standards” and “to advise UBS governance and Global Bible Translation in matters of UBS translation policy” (Terms of Reference, n.2). In this context we have decided to present this position paper to the UBS Fellowship Council. The pressures of various nature on UBS Bible translation more and more threaten not only the quantity of projects but the very quality of a core mission of UBS. This concern brings COTP to the scene.

Bible translation organisations are under greater pressure than ever to work “faster, cheaper and better”. Common wisdom says that it is hard to achieve all three at once, and it is the last of them, *quality*, that is most under threat. The pressure is coming from efficiency- and economics-focussed funders, from young and culturally inexperienced western technologists, and from a particularly impatient brand of western evangelical Christianity. The present document summarizes why quality in translating the Bible is vital and why and how it should be maintained. It is intended to help us in our respectful communication with funding partners.

The UBS fellowship is committed to certain *values*, including:

- *Ownership*: UBS translation projects should be pursued in a way that affirms in every of its aspects people’s ownership of their language, of their culture, and of the process of importing biblical meanings into their culture.
- *Diversity*: UBS is a global, interconfessional community, respecting a wide range of cultural, theological and ethical perspectives. In project formation, this may mean very different local views on the role of age or professional hierarchy as against qualifications or professional achievements. In translation principles, this may mean honouring a range of different perspectives on legitimate types of translational equivalence, levels of contextualisation and engagement with non-Christian religious idioms, *etc.*
- *Scholarship*: Biblical Studies, Linguistics and Translation Studies have always been essential disciplines to UBS’s concept of Bible translation work, and UBS’s identity and brand depend in significant part on this reputation.
- *The Church, worldwide and local*: UBS’s primary constituency is the *Churches*, and they generally want mainstream translations that they can trust and that are in line with historic Christian orthodoxy. They are also open to more creative approaches for engaging non-Christian audiences, but still in line with the quality that they expect from the UBS brand.

The definition of Bible translation quality and the practice of quality assurance (QA) in UBS are naturally derived from these values as they interact with broader scholarly discussions of functional equivalence, the visibility of the translator, *skopos* theory and loyalty, contextualisation, *etc.*

In the UBS translation tradition, QA is applied in the first instance to *personnel* and *procedures*, before *product*. Our principles vary widely across our diverse organisation, and there are few absolutes, however some generalisations can be made.

1. Personnel

Bible translation *personnel* includes translators, reviewers, consultants and translation project managers. Fundamental parameters:

- translators are native speakers of the language of the project, to ensure that naturalness and clarity of the translation can be achieved
- since native language competence is not sufficient for a translation fulfilling the intended communicative functions, translators, reviewers and consultants must have translation competence, i.e., the ability to solve not only linguistic but also pragmatic and cultural translation problems by using the appropriate translation techniques together with any available digital or traditional tools in order to produce texts that are both comprehensible and acceptable for the respective target-culture audience
- a translation team must include at least one '*exegete*', who has good access to the Hebrew/Greek source text (this may be a translator or an outsider)
- a translation team must be *interconfessional* as much as possible
- a translation consultant (TC) regularly must have a *PhD* and a (post-academic) professional training programme

All personnel receive ongoing *training* from a Bible Society TC, a GMT Global Translation Advisor (senior consultant) or members of the GMT teams Translation Project Management and Global Bible Technology. This training may take the form of on-the-job interactions, or of specially prepared training courses (online or face-to-face). Some Bible Society translators also benefit from training courses organised by partners such as SIL International. UBS organises an annual cycle of translation training modules for local TOs and translators.

2. Procedures

UBS translation *procedures* focus on whatever promotes translators' own personal and communal engagement in an ownership of the mediation process between the source text (ST) and receptor text (RT). The translator is the one who imports biblical meanings into her or his own culture. Any outside exegete, TC or translation project manager involved in the project is there to serve the needs of the translator in this process, not only to correct but to empower.

Bible translation *procedures* also include some basic parameters:

- primary references are the *source text* (the UBS scholarly editions BHS and NA/UBS, with interlinear glosses as needed), a formally equivalent *base text* (e.g. English ESV, French TOB) and a functionally equivalent *model text* (e.g. English GNT, French NFC, Spanish DHH.)
- most translators also use the UBS *Translator's Handbooks* (available in Paratext in English and partly in some other languages as well)
- all *technologies that facilitate engagement with ST* are actively promoted, including those available in Paratext and Logos
- translations typically go through *four stages of work*: drafting, team-checking, review/testing, consultancy

Consequently, in UBS we do not do translations from other modern translations or related-language adaptations (adaptations of a translation to another language) or use any type of technology such as CARLA, AdaptIt. It is UBS' long-held principle that we start with *local human engagement with ST*. This principle is particularly important as we face the challenges and opportunities of AI, and other organisations' increasing promotion of technologies based on different values.

3. Products

The "*products*" of Bible translation processes are translations or "target texts" (TT).

The most basic and broadly respected parameters for Bible translation quality are that a translation should be "*accurate, clear, natural and acceptable/appropriate*". These parameters are closely interconnected. Thus, despite the tension perceived by some between accuracy and naturalness, for example, we maintain that for a translation to be truly accurate, it must in fact be natural.

TTs receive QA consultancy input ("consultant checking") from UBS TCs and GTAs. Some organisations focus heavily on "checking" the product, and so their consultants check every word of the translated text. By contrast, in UBS, especially where we are very confident in the personnel (the translators and exegete) and their procedures, we may often *spot-check*. This has the advantage of leaving the primary responsibility for rendering the source text into the target text with the translation team, thus fostering local ownership and accountability. Other organisations may also emphasise the use of written "*back-translations*" (the term unfortunately implying that the TT was translated from *e.g.* English and is translated word-for-word "back" into English). This may at worst result in a consultant looking only at, *e.g.*, the ESV and a back-translation of the TT. By contrast, in UBS, whilst we may sometimes use such written glosses of the TT, we more normally emphasise use of the Paratext project interlineariser together with verbal interaction with the translators (whether face-to-face or online), which keeps us looking at ST and RT as we should.

4. Publishing

Bible translation *publishing* also requires QA, though the consultant's role in this has not always been respected. Translated texts may of course take on new meanings when used in new publishing contexts. Thus typesetting, graphic design, graphic elements, cover design, branding, digital and audio-visual products should all properly receive some input from the assigned translation consultant as well as of course from specialists in those fields and the translators themselves.

Some QA principles in publishing that we hold to:

- We normally publish historically-recognised *canons* following recognised *textual traditions*
- Paratextual materials should be *non-sectarian, in view of our interconfessional position*
- Translators are not normally to be *named* in the product. This is to protect the translators as well as the copyright-holding Bible Society

5. Translation Consultants and Global Translation Advisors

Bible Society TCs and GMT GTAs are at the centre of all of the above. They interview personnel, assist in establishing project procedures, consult on the product and contribute to publishing decisions. They thus need to have advanced knowledge, skills and attitudes in a wide range of technical, research, translation, interpersonal, intercultural and managerial domains. Maintaining the quality of the GTA team (both in terms of recruitment and continued professional development) sets a key benchmark from which translation quality expectations filter through to the whole of the UBS fellowship.

6. Conclusion

Some recent changes in patterns of Bible use may make the QA of Bible translations seem less necessary in the eyes of some. It might even be suggested that translations in lower registers, in hybrid languages, for non-Christians *etc.* need not be subject to such stringent QA as those which are expected to be foundational to the theology and practice of a Christian community. This is not the view of UBS because it is not the view of the Churches, which expect congruence in quality across all UBS products.

Similarly, throughout the above characterisation of UBS QA practices, it should be clear that our insistence on translation quality is grounded in deeply held values concerning the *Church* (our core constituency), the *Bible* (the source text) and the *translators*, who are performing the greatest single missiological and transformational task that their culture may ever know.

Finally, of course, UBS translation personnel work not as for a human master or employer, but with a deep sense of sacred duty and reverence towards the One who has entrusted us with communicating His words to His people. The presence of quality-assured translated Scriptures in a language community is a tangible testimony of God's presence in that community.