

Bible Translation as Incarnation of the Word of God: Transformational Power through Form and Meaning

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Abstract

Bible translation is not a neutral activity, divested of any moral, spiritual, or cultural claim or responsibility. Form has often distorted meaning but happily meaning has often created new hybrid forms in different cultures. This paper addresses the need to work out the incarnational aspect of Bible translation in terms of a conscious multimodal perspective. First, there is a need for a philosophical-theological account of the dialectical relationship between form and meaning. Second, we need to reinterpret the relationship among different types of embodied performance, such as oral and written translation, as part of the same multimodal reality. Finally, Bible translation should promote the appropriation of Scripture through the community's culture in different forms in order to unleash its transformational power. Multimodal theory can offer a valuable tool to treat all types and modes of translation as equal, but distinct, expressions, thus acknowledging different cultures, people groups, and communities of faith.

Keywords

intersemiotic translation, form and meaning, translation ideology, performance, multimodality

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Introduction

In the long history of Bible translation, we can see occasions when a translation has failed to achieve its purpose and has led to a mismatch in communication. More often than not, it is not just a matter of content but also a matter of form and meaning not coalescing well. There is the example of the Inca Atahualpa (see Figure 1), who, when told that the Good Book would speak to him, put it to his ears and rejected it quite literally by throwing it to the ground while exclaiming, “I don’t hear anything.” We may smile at the naivete and the supposed simplemindedness of the Inca in thinking that a book would be able to speak. But let us start instead with the glaring ethnocentricity and simplemindedness of the *conquistadores* in thinking that Spanish was universal, and the underlying naive assumption that the word of God is uniquely equivalent to a printed book in a particular language. Moreover, a mere 500 years later, we put iPads, notebook computers, radios, and other devices to our ear, and can truly say that they do speak to us. The issue was the form; that is, the *conquistadores* were using the wrong medium for their particular audience, a recurring issue over the centuries.



Figure 1. In this 1534 woodcut, Emperor Atahualpa, seated on a litter, is offered a Bible by the priest Valverde (Xerez 1534).

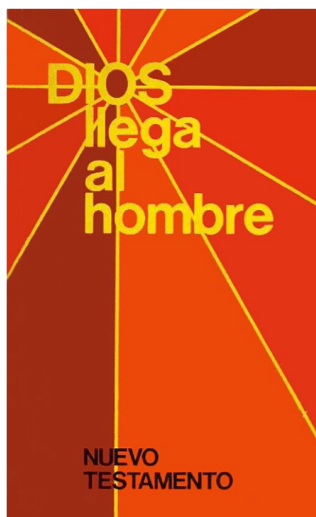


Figure 2. Cover of *Dios llega al hombre* (God reaches man), the first New Testament translation to use the dynamic-equivalent approach in Spanish. Subsequently, the complete Bible would be called *Dios Habla Hoy* (God speaks today).

When the Bible was published in a common language Spanish translation, *Dios Habla Hoy* (God speaks today), scores of people in the Americas rejected it. It was a different type of translation and had a colorful cover (so it did not look like a Bible; see Figure 2), and it had restored the deuterocanonical books as part of the canon in a parallel edition for Catholics. Communities of faith in the evangelical world took offense; the canonical range of the Scriptures was violated, from their viewpoint.¹ Some had forgotten (and a larger group never knew) that the translation by Casiodoro de Reina and Cipriano de Valera (Reina-Valera) included these books—though at the end and not in the middle.

From its inception, Christianity has revolved around orality and embodied performance as a key social dynamic, which determined its dissemination.² Writing was important in the ancient world, but it was largely in the service of orality. Oral renditions of the Gospels almost certainly played a

¹ Animosity between the dominant Roman Catholic Church and the growing minority of evangelical churches also contributed to this rejection.

² See Hurtado (2014; 2016) for a justified caveat against an oversimplification of the role of orality in the ancient world. The binary division between writing and orality should be replaced by notions of “symbiosis” and “interplay” between the two modalities (Botha 2012, 23; Hearon 2006, 8–9; 2010, 70–74; Maxey 2009, 110).

key role and interacted with the final written canonical form (Lee and Scott 2009, 11–39). The fact that the Gospels are in Greek, though the historical Jesus most definitely spoke Aramaic with the peasants of Galilee, points to translation as key to the disciples of the Way. Before them, the monumental Alexandrian translation of the Old Testament, later called the Septuagint, is a tribute to the desire of the Jewish community in the Diaspora to create new forms of the Hebrew text. Much later, Christianity produced translations like the Syriac Peshitta, the Coptic translations, the Old Latin, and, in the fourth century, the Vulgate by Jerome.³ Through their actions, across the centuries, Christians have shown there should be no blind allegiance to one particular language for religious use, but that translation and localization were key to the spread of the gospel. However, it is also true that, in each age, adherence to one form of translation or another often led to a dogmatic blindfold, which hindered engagement with the meaning of the translated text.

Not only did the language and translation methodology vary, but there was a move from the use of the scroll to the use of the codex. We cannot be sure if it was an invention of one or more Christian scribes, but its wider adoption can be credited to the spread of Christianity. For the importance of the attention to the visual presentation of the codex among Christians very early on, see Lowden 2007). Note should be taken of the widespread use of the Greco-Roman epistolary genre and the tradition, in some quarters, of live delivery by emissaries who embodied the letters through performance. Furthermore, the letters of Paul, for example, show communal activity both in their composition and their audience (“From Paul and all the brothers with me to those called out in Galatia,” “From Paul and Timothy to all the saints . . . in Philippi, . . . with the overseers and deacons”; my translation). The rich and diverse manuscript tradition of the New Testament also testifies to the variants that arose from the change in delivery to different audiences and change in sociocultural contexts (Vearncombe 2016, 387–404).⁴

The metaphor of incarnation for Bible translation helps us understand the latter through the interplay of form and meaning. Semiosis, that is the construction of meaning from within a semiotic framework, is achieved through a continual embodiment of communication. Writing, which is one of the most well known and traditional methods of communication, is also the embodiment of concepts through the mechanics of carvings on stone, ink marks on paper or vellum, the use of printing molds, and digital techniques. Every time a text is transmediatized, its meaning “explodes,”

³ For many centuries, the Vulgate dominated the church in Europe. For an interesting article on its creation and influence, see Tkacz 1996, 42–72.

⁴ For example, the letter to the Ephesians was probably a circular letter performed in different churches (see Metzger 1994, 532).

refracts, into a spectrum of possible interpretations, constrained by the possibilities of that medium. Each semiotic system, that is, each communication platform, constitutes a form of meaning presentation that needs to be unpacked, interpreted, and inferred from. However, there is a continuity of meaning that will always entail a gain or loss of significance.⁵

Form and meaning: A theological-philosophical reflection

We have concentrated so often on the default, dominant communication setting of particular societies that we neglect the power dynamics that are inherent in any semiotic system. Communication is from its beginnings *multimodal*, and so there is no totally “pure” system. Ancient manuscripts carry embodiment through the handwriting of the writer, *scriptio continua*, the special division of texts into *cola* according to sound and content patterns, and, later on, division into sections and the use of illustrations (Lee and Scott 2009, 108–11). Thus, what has often escaped our active attention—especially among those who engage with actual Bible translations in churches—as to the praxis of translation, is that form is embedded in our way of communication and culturally defined to a high degree. While this facilitates communication among those who are used to that form, it alienates others and can be part of a conquistador mentality.⁶ Proof of this can be found in the history of Bible translation use, where the mediating language of translation (e.g., English, French, Spanish), not the languages of the Bible themselves, become masters and conquerors, instead of mere vehicles or partners in dialogue. So churchgoers compare a new translation in their mother tongue with these translations in languages of wider communication. In addition, the form and structures of these source languages become the model for translation.⁷

⁵ Sign language translation expresses meaning in a three-dimensional form, which pen and paper can never properly do. Colors and shapes in paintings add a layer of form that expresses new meanings or validates old meanings in new ways. In mathematical symbolic use, language, mathematical symbols, visuals (e.g., graphs, geometric forms), and logical thinking combine to form a new multimodal reality.

⁶ This mentality is also to be blamed for the marginalization of women, indigenous communities, and the deaf, sadly enough even in churches, parachurch organizations, and in Bible translation.

⁷ In *The Sunday Gleaner*, a Jamaican newspaper, a letter to the editor expressed alarm at “why some people wanted to vulgarize everything. . . . [The *patwa* translation] signal[s] our lost hope of getting good English spoken by the majority of Jamaicans. . . . What are these jackasses going to do next? Translate Shakespeare and Milton into patois?” (Cargill 1996).

When we say that Bible translation is incarnational and we use that as a metaphor and model for translation, we need to define what we mean. There can be a notion of incarnation—the transformation from an ethereal form to an embodied form—which is despotic and alienating. In that way of thinking, incarnation as metaphor becomes an invasion, a conquering of the other, where the other is subjugated and becomes invisible. But the biblical notion of incarnation (as we see in the primitive Christian hymn of Philippians 2) is a model of *kenosis*, of emptying oneself, to enter sacrificially into that space as an equal who seeks to elevate and transform the other in ways that reveal the latter's true potential. Christianity affirmed the "equality" in weakness and experience, but always also confirmed the sinlessness of the Incarnated One. However, when we apply this metaphor to Bible translation we need to be careful not to include the notion of perfection. This is an important conceptual limitation of the metaphor. Bible translation only approximates⁸ but can never be an exact copy of some original; rather it is the outworking of the accepted original within a particular cultural and semiotic system.

Bible translation approximates the point of departure while creating a surplus of meaning in the language of translation. The community of faith can still assert that this or that translation is the word of God, if we keep in mind that we are talking about an incarnational recreation of Scripture, which ultimately is a witness to the dealings between God and humanity. Ultimately, to the Christian, the Word of God is Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, each medium brings its own set of socio-cognitive dynamics by demanding a different type of "fleshing out of the message," whether it be through vocal intonation, pitch and timbre, or cheremes⁹ and non-manual features in sign language.¹⁰ This is not to say that all re-creations are the same in their communicative intent or content; there is a sense, in the case of the Bible, in which the written form will always remain the primary point of correspondence.

In the 2011 Beekman Lecture at the Bible Translation Conference in Dallas, James Maxey presented a metaphor of translation in which hospitality is the main dynamic (2011). This is indeed a step forward, away from the "conquer and conquered paradigm," where translation may be seen as cultural invasion or "taking over." The translation process becomes then a

⁸ See, among others, Reiss and Vermeer (1984) and Goerling (1996). The latter gives a very accessible summary of the different ways in which equivalence has been interpreted.

⁹ Cheremes (from Greek *kheir* "hand") are to sign languages what phonemes are to spoken language. They are the elementary, meaningless units of a sign which can be organized into meaningful semantic units and can be further described as any perceptually distinct unit, like handshape, hand movement, and location of the hand(s) in relation to the body, which distinguishes a sign in a specified sign language from another sign. Nowadays the term "phoneme" is also used in sign language linguistics.

¹⁰ In Deaf culture there is the notion of Deaf gain which looks at what the advantages of being Deaf are instead of defining Deafhood as the lack of hearing (Holcomb 2013, 308).

relationship of hosts and guests, between the receptor language and culture and the source language, between translation agencies and the mission field. A host model can be a productive way, among others, to do away with the very appearance of conquest among languages and cultures, although, as with all theoretical models, the issue is often not so much theory but the attitude of all the partners, including the translation consultant, in a project. Indeed each metaphor or model has its limitations. In the case of the host model, some particular cultural notions of hospitality imply a level of reverence that does lead to the prioritization of the guests' agenda. Of course, adherents of this metaphor for translation would argue that the "guest" (such as consultants, translation agencies, administrative personnel) needs to behave ethically as a guest. In this regard, the imagery of "pushing-hands" by the late Martha Cheung (Robinson 2016) is very illuminating and productive. In her model, translation is seen as a continual dance between two able martial arts specialists, pushing and yielding, giving way when necessary and pushing back on key occasions.¹¹ This tense, dynamic reality better characterizes the equilibrium that translators need constantly to find between what to "betray"¹² and what to uphold, as they creatively rewrite, retell, and reiterate the *textum*¹³ from one language and medium to the other. We need to think of all translation as embodied, even as all communication is embodied. Embodied translation runs the gamut from simple semiotic systems to more complex outcomes.

Form and meaning from a multimodal perspective

The tensions that we continue to experience between form and meaning, which have historically stalked theories of Bible translation and of translation in general, have arisen from what we have inherited from a Platonic worldview where there is the distinction between the real thing and what it appears to be on different levels. The idealized goal of the Chomskyan generative grammar analysis was the basis for the very successful first formulations of dynamic-equivalence theory in Nida and Taber (1969) and other publications. However, concepts like superstructure and kernel structure neglect the fact that the kernel is used in a social context and between interlocutors. An excellent complementary method to handle form and meaning differences and the reality of different semiotic systems comes from the

¹¹ "Pushing-hands," or *tuishou*, is a non-violent martial art practice involving two persons.

¹² The medieval Italian adage *traduttore traditore* (translator traitor) indicates that the translator is forced to make choices among different types of fidelity to the source text.

¹³ The tapestry (wovenness), the fabric of any sign system, is a *textum*. The metaphor comes from the ancient craft of textile weaving.

Australian school of multimodality founded by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2001). They assert that reality is multimodal, combining different sign systems at any given time. When we look, from this semiotic perspective, at ancient writing on papyri, ostraca, or parchment, or the move from scroll to codex, we should not think we are talking about just one sign system. The different materials used for writing and the role of the scribe as a part of society all have a social embedding. Moreover, writing itself does not have any meaning without its potential to be realized, whether externally or internally. Sound is very much part of the hermeneutics of writing. Writing is another embodiment of the sound system. In that sense all communication, and, actually all translation, is multimodal. Multimodal theory just reminds us systematically that the actual social setting of language use deserves more attention.

If we want to understand language, we have to understand it in its immediate social context, where people *do* language and it is something that you can empirically study, rather than making hypothetical models of what is happening in the brain. (Moschini 2014, 204)

This entails power relationships, socioeconomic structures, church relations, sociolinguistic dynamics, and, of course, media considerations. The focus on what people do with language “outside of the brain” leads automatically to embodiment in different forms. One can also say that the brain “embodies” its functions and concepts through the body.¹⁴ The social semiotics that Kress and van Leeuwen advocate is based on Halliday and Hasan’s model of genres, discourse, and language functionality:

Halliday focused on varieties of language, “genres” and “registers.” Language was no longer a unified thing, the same everywhere: the same language was different in different contexts and yes, you can construct “the” language as an overall resource, but that resource is used differently in different contexts. (Moschini 2014, 204)

Furthermore, Halliday’s discourse analysis (1978; 2002), based upon the function of different discourse strategies of written and spoken language, offers a tool for application to other semiotic systems, such as visual ones. Through the multimodal approach, one can analyze visual and auditory signs in terms of their discourse system. To work with different semiotic systems and to produce a qualitatively sound intersemiotic translation, in the terminology of Jakobson (1959), is to define translation across different

¹⁴ Advocacy of the multimodal approach does not in my view exclude seeing cognitive linguistics and relevance theory as providing valuable contributions.

communication platforms. This necessitates a grammar of sounds (not just of language), a grammar of visual image, a grammar of kinesics (gestures and other motions), a grammar of color use in images, and so forth.¹⁵ Of course, just as in spoken language translation, we are not looking for exact direct translations in the common sense of the word, but for approximations between different sign systems. There is no attempt to find a direct translation¹⁶ between semiotic systems that are fundamentally different, such as language and image (O'Halloran, Tan, and Wignell 2016, 201).

Multimodality focuses the interlocutor on reality as it presents itself in terms of hybrid communication forms. It highlights the multidimensional reality of social artifacts and events. Thus, for example, the layout, page profile, and text segmentation are all part of the translation, not just the words used to translate. There are semiotic processes, like “framing” and “composition,” which we find across different modes of communication (visual, auditory, in performance, and sign language). Knowledge of these intersemiotic universals will help in translation across semiotic systems. Indeed, other modern approaches, like relevance theory and cognitive linguistics, have shown the importance of context; from a social semiotics perspective, form and meaning coalesce into context and text. The social context and the modality of communication are not just extras or peripheral to the more prominent sign systems like writing, speaking, painting, and so forth, but semiosis is obtained through a combination of all these elements. These are all semiotic resources which the interlocutor uses within a social context to do things with “language,” in the wider sense of that term. Bible translators should take van Leeuwen’s advice to heart:

The role [of context] follows from the very nature of the socio-semiotic approach: if you go back to Malinowski, the integration of the text and the context is the key. The context is not just some marginal thing that we can quickly “dispose of” and then go back to the text. The entire event of which the text is part of is a social practice that should be studied as a whole. (Moschini 2014, 208)

¹⁵ See Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 (visual) and van Leeuwen 1999 (sound). There has been some pushback from linguists who do not see multimodality as scientific, but even cognitive linguists have been applying multimodality as a welcome addition to their own work (Sanz 2015).

¹⁶ Of course, “direct translation” as defined by relevance theory would be a workable concept. “A receptor language utterance is a direct translation of a source language utterance if and only if it purports to interpretively resemble the original, completely in the context envisaged for the original” (Gutt 2000, 177). For example, like spoken language, sign language translation has different levels of communicative clues that can be offered, depending on the audience’s knowledge of the context.

This semiotic analysis also has consequences for the notion of the original. The traditional notion of the original as a monolithic and static reality needs to be discarded or historically reconstituted. However, the human brain and human society do appear to need a “pseudo original” or a “working hypothesis of an original” at some time in communication. Therefore, Bible translators need to define within their localized context what the original will be. To frame it differently, what are the expectations surrounding the notion of Bible translation in a culture? Epistemologically, there has to be a cutoff point in the referencing of signs, otherwise, no action can take place and no processing would be possible. The fact that the “original” turns out to be plural, dynamic, and multifaceted does not negate the fact that a “constructed or proxy original” is needed for communication, for scientific endeavor, and for Bible translation. Translation concepts like telling, retelling, re-creation, and repetition all require a notion of a prior event or content, or a signified–signifier pair, to function as a correspondence point. Church history has shown that people can pay lip service to some “Greek or Hebrew source text” while their *de facto* text of reference is, for example, the Vulgate, Segond, Almeida, or KJV. Indeed, the “original” is that which functions as a point of reference within a concrete social context.

It goes beyond the purpose of this paper to give detailed examples of multimodal analysis. Many scholars have applied and expanded upon Halliday and Hasan’s three-dimensional grid for the application to different media of communication. The three aspects of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning are then applied to different semiotic systems (Halliday 1978; 2008; Halliday and Hasan 1985).¹⁷ O’Halloran, Tan, and Wignell (2016, 218ff.) give a good example of how these three levels can be applied to photography, video, and mathematical representation, and this offers plenty of possibilities for application to Bible translation. For their research, they have developed their own software. Indeed, a more well-known program like ELAN¹⁸ can be used to analyze video, audio, and other features in a detailed manner. These tools can help consultants to deal with multimodal projects. In the area of translation for sign languages, historically, teams have used ELAN for the lack of a specific tool like Paratext (a widely used computer program in Bible translation). There is an initiative of The

¹⁷ Ideational meaning consists of both experiential meaning (structures experience of the world) and logical meaning (makes logical connections in the world). Interpersonal meaning enacts social relations and creates a stance towards the world, while textual meaning organizes experiential, logical, and interpersonal meanings.

¹⁸ ELAN is a linguistic annotation program that can combine writing, audio, and video. It is used in sign language translation analysis or any kind of theatrical or dance performance, among other things (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>). See also Sloetjes and Wittenburg 2008.

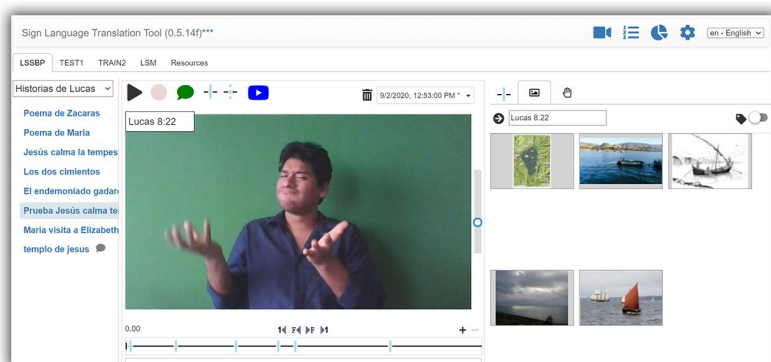


Figure 3. Sign Language Translation Tool. Draft translation of Luke 8. Junior Gianfranco Alarcón, Peruvian Sign Language translation team, Bible Society of Peru.

Seed Company and Avodah Labs called the Visual Language Interpretation System (VLIS), which uses artificial intelligence to aid sign language translators in their work.¹⁹ In the last few years, Stuart Thiessen (Deaf Bible Society) and Nathan Miles (United Bible Societies) have been working on a Sign Language Translation Tool program, which is specifically geared to sign language Bible translation (see Figure 3). The latter program has proven its usefulness already and teams around the world are using it.

Cultural embodiment as transformational: Power dynamics

The community of Bible translators has seen a shift from focusing on oral translation to a broader concept of embodied translation. We need a model that strongly combines the analytical with the social-semiotic aspect. There is a need for a multimodal approach where, from the start, the sociocultural context of communication is taken seriously. Incarnational translation, if it is to account for the reality of the form–meaning dialectic, has to be framed as an approximation of the source text through new forms. These forms should be judged according to the criteria of quality and acceptability in terms of media use and the sociocultural context.

¹⁹ “The Visual Language Interpretation System (VLIS) is innovative hardware and software that captures American Sign Language and outputs English text. . . . The human factor can never be removed from translation because only man has a soul and is able to relate to the Spirit of God. Rather than replace people, this artificial intelligence allows individuals who are not software engineers to comfortably and efficiently interact with the VLIS tool” (<https://seedcompany.com/stories/seeds-of-innovation>; text no longer available at this URL).

James Maxey states in his article on Bible translation in *The Dictionary of Bible and Ancient Media*,

A related aspect of the cultural turn in translation studies is the recognition of how translation is involved in asymmetric power relations. Translation, in general, has historically been used as part of oppressive colonial mindsets, and so it is natural for translation studies in a cultural turn to be informed by postcolonial studies. The combination of these foci, identity, and power accentuates that the translator can no longer be viewed as a neutral liaison between source and target texts, but rather plays the role of a cultural mediator. (Maxey 2017, 432)

Indeed, the very dominance of print media and writing has been to the detriment of the performance-centeredness of communication in different cultures. But this can be said also of the church in the West in general and all of us who are historically part of it. The written form became the center of the Protestant movement; thus, the word of God, for many, was equal to a printed book. This dominance is also seen in the specific case of the author's own cultural setting in the Caribbean. The supremacy of print and writing has dominated Caribbean churches to the degree that the format, color, and language of the assumed "authoritative" version or versions stifled the use of Creole languages in the church context and beyond (Winedt 2013). The idealized pastor, in some circles, became a man of letters instead of a more culturally anchored narrator and performer. In addition, the female voice, often expressed through storytelling, was excluded from this religious expository discourse.

Bible translation as an expression of visual and performance culture

As part of the multimodal approach, it will be important for translators and consultants to work at sharpening and prioritizing their skills in nonprint media—for example, in the use of images or in the use of performance. For translation into sign languages, the use of visuals in translation is key, not just as an outcome of the translation but as an intrinsic part of the signing, and even in the analysis of the Scripture passages and other interpretative processes (see Figure 4). As Bonfiglio states in *The Dictionary of the Bible and Ancient Media*,

While some degree of caution is necessary when it comes to integrating biblical studies and visual culture studies, there remain several distinct advantages to a union of the two fields. First and most generally, it would be difficult to conceive of any definition of "religion," whether ancient or modern, that excluded the visual realm. Historian Colleen McDannell argues that instead of merely being



Figure 4. Sign language translation, Peru (Junior García Alarcón and Abigail de la Vega).

a matter of words and creeds, “genuine religion has always been expressed and made real with objects, architecture, art, and landscapes” (1995, 272). It follows that if visual culture matters in the formation and expression of religion, then visual culture necessarily must matter in the study of religion, whatever the historical context may be. (Bonfiglio 2017, 445)

We find increasingly that a great part of our hearing constituency, both in the West and in the Global South, shares the common need for meaning through visualization, albeit in a different form than the Deaf community (Smith 2012). When it comes to Scripture performance, we have many good examples in the scholarly guild of its usefulness in exegesis and hermeneutics.²⁰ Furthermore, some of us have seen the positive effects of working with translators on the performance of passages as a didactic tool to aid in the comprehension of the text and the exposure of cultural misunderstandings. Performance has also proven to be a very effective tool in a more critical cultural engagement with the text (Winedt 2015). The translation community, including the exegetical consultant, needs to be perceptive of media use and effect, and critical of the centuries-old assumptions of the book culture. For example, performance exercises can greatly help both in text analysis and in finding translation approximations.²¹ As William Graham correctly states,

²⁰ See, among others, Carr (2005), Boomershine (2015), Botha (2012), Dewey (2013), Wendland (2008; 2013), Doan and Giles (2005), Hearon and Ruge-Jones (2009), Rhoads (2017), Maxey and Wendland (2012), Perry (2016). There is a research and interaction platform on biblical performance criticism at <http://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org>.

²¹ In sign language translation video recording, lighting and camera techniques are a key part of the translation process. In audio recording of written text, intonation, volume, timbre, and dramatization through sound effects are not peripheral but central to that translation mode.

[We] have constantly to question our assumptions about books, reading, and writing, not only when dealing with non-Western cultures that are often still highly oral, but also when studying our own culture prior to the nineteenth century. The original and basic orality of reading is the key to the fundamentally oral function of written texts outside of the special context in which we live today. (Graham 1987, 33)

One example of how the form of a text interplays with its social embeddedness is the case of Bible translation in the Jamaican setting. Because of the predominantly oral nature of the Jamaican Creole language, its speakers have rejected its use in printed form. Interestingly, some of the same people who master a very complex orthography system like English find it difficult to learn the much easier and logical Cassidy spelling that is used in the Jamaican Creole New Testament translation. This rejection is not just based on a notion of a “pseudo original” like KJV, or on formal English education (though that is an important contributing factor), but it relates to a notion of identity and power. Many Creole speakers who also have high competency in English do not want to be totally identified with monolingual Creole speakers.

The challenges of multimodality

Intersemiotic translation has uncovered the inherent bias of a hegemonic imposition of form on different cultures, not just through language use, but also through the medium of writing. At the same time, we need to be careful not to impose some fixed notion of primary orality upon cultures and people groups. In many cultures with a high illiteracy rate in the mother tongue or the language of wider communication, there is also a complex relationship between writing as a cultural phenomenon and the identity of the group. The Caribbean region (in both its English-speaking and non-English-speaking parts) has seen the influence of the King James Version, which has reigned supreme as a pseudo original. This shows that translation is not just meaning in search of a form, but rather an embodiment of form-meaning as a composite. Any medium of communication is intrinsically linked to its materiality. If the translation community ignores that fact, it does so at its own peril. While it rightly continues to produce printed texts, it should not ignore or marginalize the opportunities of oral/aural, visual, and hyperlinked cyber-translations. For example, Bible translation consultancy needs to be expanded to include acquaintance with the different forms of materiality of the embodiment of the scriptural message, in order to be able to better support the translators in each community.²²

²² Work in any capacity as a hearing consultant, helping with exegesis in a sign language project, would require some basic knowledge of video editing, even though it is the Deaf who are in charge of this technical aspect as part of the translation process.



Figure 5. Performance of the Passion Narrative combining different media, visual and oral styles. Iglesia Bida Nobo Bándariba, Curaçao (New Life Church Eastside, Curaçao). Left to right: Marlon Winedt, Merelin Rosalina, Vicia Poulina, Raniella Rafaela, Priscilla Winklaar, and Yvette Winklaar.

It is then not simply a matter of an abstract change in mentality; our focus on social semiotics, but also issues like acceptability, quality control, and fidelity, all come into play. Fidelity is intrinsically linked to a community's working hypothesis of what constitutes the "original." It is not just a matter of source-language fidelity versus target-language expression of meaning. There is a materiality that produces its semiosis, its meaning-making process. And this takes place in different forms, like ink on paper, book form, three-dimensional signing with the hands, face, and body, sound characteristics such as intonation, pitch, timbre, speed, and color of voice. Therefore, it is not a matter of the mere abstract, disembodied meaning in search of a "body," like a ghost in a horror story. From a social semiotic perspective, there is no "disembodied meaning." There is always meaning that arises from *a priori* social and cognitive contexts. This meaning can be transformed within the same semiotic system (e.g., interlingual translation) or can undergo resemiotization or prioritization in a new semiotic system, like in the case of a theater performance of a written Bible text (see Figure 5).

Multimodal theory approaches all forms of communication from the perspective that it is a combination of modalities within a social context that helps to produce meaning more integrally. In traditional Bible translation, the printed text itself, with its illustrations or other paratextual material, produces its own connotations, depending on the audience. So the same

book can be a work of literature to the secular language lover, a daily book of guidance or a liturgical text to some believers, and, for the person who cannot read or write, it might even have a symbolic meaning as an amulet for spiritual protection.

There is a need to engage the ideologies present in the text, in its performance and its translation. Not that one is doing away with the traditional forms of criticism and analysis, like literary criticism, source criticism, and text criticism; rather we need to expose the power dynamics in the text itself, excavate the redemptive elements of the text, and focus on communicating the latter. These power dynamics are related to, for example, the patriarchal nature of the text and the way certain texts and their interpretations have been used to confirm a sense of male superiority, which is not a valid use.

Moreover, all those involved in Bible translation work who come from the print paradigm and culture need to continue to develop quality assessment criteria for different media, based on the cultural reality of the end users. Those who offer exegetical or linguistic expertise are not some omniscient authority, but they contribute to the epistemology of the group. Their expertise is part of the toolbox that the translation team employs to produce different types of text. Quality checking is not dependent on the approval of a translation consultant alone, functioning as an exegetical or linguistic advisor. Rather, translations are found acceptable in terms of their content and adequacy of medium by both the translators themselves and the exegetical advisor, hopefully with the backing of at least part of the local community. A social-semiotic approach exposes power and identity issues in a structural way. Aiding translation teams is not a one-way street. The “helper” also receives help from the translators he or she is helping. Form and meaning join together to create new social relationships, where all become one community of faith and knowledge.

Indeed translators, both the hearing as well as the deaf, are not invisible and should not be made invisible. The very semiotic sign systems they use to recreate come with power relationships, and particular characteristics typical of that domain. Eventually, Bible translation can broker a growing contextual theology and a profound social engagement of the local church.²³

Some lingering challenges remain for further reflection and research:

1. How do we engage people with Scripture content in a way that leads to a redemptive contextualized theology?

²³ For the promotion of indigenous theology through the vernacular, see Bediako (1998, 1999), Bivin (2010), and the TIPs project (Zetsche 2019). The latter describes an electronic platform (<https://tips.translation.bible/>) for the collection and presentation of translation insights, and thus seeds for contextual theological reflection, from languages and communities from around the world.

2. How do we deal with the colonial nature of some forms of Scripture presentation?
3. How do we prioritize meaningful forms for each community?
4. How do we avoid equating community acceptance of a translation with quality?
5. How do we avoid a top-down and unnatural imposition of orality on communities?
6. What are the intrinsic limitations and possibilities of each medium and how do they influence Bible translation work?
7. How can we validate performance as an acceptable translation in certain contexts?
8. How should we make use of the notion of an “idealized original” in Bible translation praxis?
9. How do we comply with the translation expectations of a community and yet still expand these expectations?
10. How can we continue to employ the form–meaning distinction as a generative pedagogical tool while moving away from the more rigid former paradigm?

Conclusion

“This thing does not speak to me; I cannot hear it.” The great and noble Inca was right. Throughout history, the form of the message, its very materiality, would continue to pose a hindrance to different people groups. The book did not speak to the Inca, because it was being imposed as part of the colonial will to dominate in a garb that was, and still can be, alienating and ethnocentric. The Inca could not relate to the book, his identity as a human being was not validated by it, and indeed that was not even the intention of the conquistador. The transformational power of the text is bound when we enslave it to only one form. When translation is communal interaction and the message is liberated in different media formats, the whole enterprise will make people groups visible in ways that have not happened before. Salvation is not only a spiritual enterprise but has clear societal and cultural consequences in the Gospels.

The ancient *Shema* in Deut 6.4-8 instructed the Hebrews to *write* the words, to *recite* them, to *memorize* them, to wear the phylacteries, and put what later would be called *mezuzot* on the doorposts as a visual sign. The oral-aural, the visual, and the tactile come together to bear witness to the word of God, which is not to be identified solely with any form of book, or scroll, or codex, or sign language video, or an audio or performed rendition of the same. It is, rather, the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, this theoretical musing on the transformational power of meaning and form in

Bible translation necessarily leads to Christology, because Bible translation is, *mutatis mutandis*, nothing more than an ongoing expression of the incarnation. The writer of the ancient sermon to the Hebrews expresses it eloquently:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways [Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως] by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. (Heb 1.1-2 NRSV)

The main premise of this paper is indeed that this *speaking* in our day continues to be multimodal.

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Abbreviations

Almeida	Portuguese Bible translated by João Ferreira de Almeida (1753)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
Reina-Valera	Spanish Bible translated by Casiodoro de Reina and Cipriano de Valera (1602)
Segond	French Bible translation by Louis Segond (1880)
TIPs	Translation Insights and Perspectives
VLIS	Visual Language Interpretation System