

### 3. TESTING THE REFERENCE CODES

Anyone reading the dust cover of most Bible translations will most likely find examples of self-praise for the high quality of English they contain. I'm glancing right now at a series of testimonials inside the cover of a Bible translation and I see the following words describing its English: *clarity, freshness, contemporary, grandeur of language, beauty, clearest, most accurate*. Other translations are equally grandiose in describing the excellence of English they use.

Is it true? Are Bible translations examples of good English? Are modern translations really contemporary? Are they accurate? Do they sufficiently fulfill the requirements of effective reference codes? (See pages 21-23) We're going to test these claims by taking a close look at the quality of English used in the translations.

One of the major problems encountered when evaluating the English used in scripture translations stems from the large segment of readers who have gotten used to "Bible" language being different than normal forms of English. It has become like an old vase or lamp that has always been a part of the household and is no longer recognized as a relic by family members. It's an archaic English that often goes unnoticed even by scholars and Bible translators.

It goes without saying that there is no slice of any English speaking population that actually speaks and writes the Bible English used in the older Bible translations. The only cases I have ever seen of the actual use of a particular kind of Bible English is the practice of some clergy to shift into a kind of King James English when praying publically. It's also interesting that many listeners—often even the people doing the praying—are not aware of the linguistic shift when it takes place.

Lacking an awareness of archaic language codes can take extreme forms. Even the use of Latin in liturgical services can go unnoticed by certain listeners. Familiarity with language, however, is by no means an indicator of accurate understanding.

The point is this: It can be almost impossible for a person familiar with Bible English to look at a page from a typical New Testament and recognize whether or not the English used is "normal" or not. If particular phrases or words such as *fleshly indulgence* are specifically pointed out to readers, then they agree that the expression seems old or strange and would never be used today, but if they are not directed to specific examples, readers can be unaware of even huge differences between the English used in a Bible translation and the English that is actually used in everyday literature.

There is a way, however, to make these differences immediately visible. It's a linguistic test in which words, phrases, and clauses suspected of being archaic or abnormal are taken out of the camouflage of their particular context and are placed in a more normal setting for evaluation. This exercise causes non-English expressions to become glaringly evident.

Take, for example, a familiar passage such as the beginning of John. The following text is from the *New International Version*:

<sup>1</sup> *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God.*  
<sup>2</sup> *He was with God in the beginning.*  
<sup>3</sup> *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.* <sup>4</sup> *In him was life, and that life was the light of men.* <sup>5</sup> *The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*  
<sup>6</sup> *There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.* <sup>7</sup> *He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.* <sup>8</sup> *He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.* <sup>9</sup> *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.*

Is this normal English usage? Here's what the publisher of the NIV had to say about the quality of English used in the translation:

*The New International Version . . . involves over a hundred scholars from the English-speaking world . . . Their aim is to make a translation that is clear and idiomatic, contemporary but not stilted. Literary stylists work with them in seeking simplicity of expression together with sensitive regard for the connotation and sound of the words chosen.*

This statement is from the back cover of the paperback version. It makes it sound like the NIV is in the best possible English, but is it true?

To test the naturalness and the up-to-date character of the English in this translation, we took the same sentence structures, the same verb tenses, and many of the same words and simply transferred them to another situation that masks the fact that they are from the Bible. The situation cannot be completely different, however. It must have at least some similarity to the original context. In this case, we will put the words of John 1:1-9 into the mouth of a businessman who has been invited by the Chamber of Commerce of a city to share how his company was founded.

Try to envision these words being spoken by a man in a business suit standing in front of a group of businessmen. To make this test as effective as possible, it is advisable to imagine the situation and then read the text out loud.

*In the beginning of the company was the founder and the founder was with the chief investor and the founder was an investor himself. He was with the owner in the beginning. Through him all things were planned; without him nothing was planned that has been planned. In him was the goal, and that goal was the vision of the company. The vision was proclaimed to the public, but the public has not understood it.*

*There came a man who was sent from the owner; his name was John. He came as an advertiser to inform (people) concerning the vision, so that through him all men might be convinced. He himself was not the vision, he came only as an advertiser of the vision. The true vision benefits every man coming into our city.*

What would a group of businessmen think of a speaker who actually uttered these sentences? Isn't it striking how this style of English can sound normal in a Bible translation, but completely out of place in an actual setting? Practically every sentence exhibits words, phrases, or structures that deviate markedly from standard English. English speakers do not say *in the beginning* but *at the beginning*. *Through him all things were planned* would be corrected by every English teacher to *Everything was planned by him*. No one today would ever say *that through him all men might be convinced*.

When the *New International Version* first came out, as mentioned earlier, Dr. Barclay Newman of the American Bible Society did a detailed examination of the English used in the text. It was published in an article entitled *Readability and the New International Version of the New Testament* in the journal *The Bible Translator* in July of 1980. Under the subtitle *Problems In NIV readability* Newman makes the following statements:

*An examination of the NIV text (we have focused on the NT of this version) reveals a serious lack of readableness due to long sentences, heavy grammatical arrangements, use of ecclesiastical "in-group" language, occasional ambiguity of pronominal antecedents, lack of discourse continuity, ambiguities which may emerge in public reading, arbitrary shifts in language level, and other factors. In some cases these features are carried over into the NIV from the KJV tradition; in others they have been introduced by the NIV translators themselves.*

The article then systematically illustrates some of the main problems with the readability of the text of the NIV. Following is a summary of these points with one or more examples of each. The article itself often includes over a dozen examples for each point.

- 1) Sentence length: 2 Pet 2:4-9 is a monstrosity (21 lines of text) consisting of five "if" clauses, and one clause with each of the following: "when," "then," "who," "and," "while," and "for."
- 2) Sentence initial constructions that strain the memory capacity of the reader: Luke 17:20.
- 3) Embedding and apposition: John 15:26, Rom 9:11-12
- 4) Distance between subject and predicate: Luke 11:38
- 5) Inverted and/or unnatural sentence order: Matt. 10:5
- 6) Pronoun/noun vs. noun/pronoun arrangement: Acts 3:7
- 7) Pronominal ambiguity: Matt. 17:27

- 8) Pronominal shifts that contradict English usage: Luke 11:5-6
- 9) Lack of continuity within a discourse unit: Matt. 11:25, Heb. 11:4
- 10) Problems with prepositions: Mark 1:2 (An American would never say *it is written in Bush the president*)
- 11) Biblicisms, archaisms, translationese: *be with child, what is conceived in her, brood of vipers, fulfill all righteousness, poor in spirit, hallowed be your name, birds of the air, blessed are your eyes, sons of the kingdom, if anyone would come after me, betrayed innocent blood, etc.*
- 12) Inadequate attention to the needs of persons who must depend upon hearing the scriptures read aloud: John 6:19
- 13) Unnatural collocations of words: *their worm does not die, crippled by a spirit for 18 years, surrendered Jesus to their will, you stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears, a spirit of stupor, a kind of first fruits of all he created, their destruction has not been sleeping, etc.*
- 14) Inconsistency of language level: Matt. 6:16, Luke 16:15
- 15) Unnatural usage of the definite article: *foundation on the rock, the many will be made righteous*
- 16) Sentence/paragraph initial and/now: John 12:17-31
- 17) Footnotes: many are useless Luke 1:15
- 18) Inconsistencies: Matt. 20:3: *third hour* - (Greek method), Acts 2:15 - *nine in the morning* (modern method)
- 19) Nonsense and sequitur: Acts 28:23 *They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying.* (Where is the comparison intended by *even greater numbers*?) Luke 13:23
- 20) Miscellaneous: Problems with ellipsis, negative constructions, gerunds, and participles.

How is it possible that a prestigious translation like the *New International Version* can contain so many blatantly inept usages of English? And in view of these deficiencies in the English text, how could its publishers possibly make the claim that ... *our aim was to make a translation that is clear and idiomatic, contemporary but not stilted. ... seeking simplicity of expression together with sensitive regard for the connotation and sound of the words chosen?*

Nothing could be further from the truth. Dr. Newman made this comment about what he suspects are the reasons for the deficient character of the English used in the *NIV*:

*The preface to the NIV Bible opens by saying, "The New International Version is a completely new translation" (page vii). However, the same preface states on the same page, "The committee also sought to preserve some measure of continuity with the long tradition of translating of the Scriptures into English." The second of these statements reflects more accurately than the first, the nature of this version. On virtually every page, the dependence of the NIV translators upon the KJV tradition is obvious in the choice of vocabulary, time-honored clichés, syntactic structures which parallel the Hebrew and Greek, and stylistic features. Actually, it is a "patchwork" translation which oscillates eclectically between direct dependence on this tradition and the use of new and contemporary style, with considerable unevenness as a result.*

This evaluation of the English used in a prestigious Bible translation should convince anyone that there is a tremendous discrepancy between the quality of scripture translations as perceived in the general public and the actual quality of the language usage in the translations themselves.

Is the NIV alone in its inept use of the English language? Our evaluation of nine other English language New Testaments indicates that the negative example of the NIV is by no means unusual, even among so-called modern English translations. If anything, the so-called contemporary English of many modern translations can be just as strange-sounding as older versions. *The New Living Translation*, a translation that claims to use modern English, puts John 1:1-9 in this way:

*1 In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. <sup>4</sup> Life itself was in him, and this life gives light to everyone. <sup>5</sup> The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.*

*<sup>6</sup> God sent John the Baptist <sup>7</sup> to tell everyone about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. <sup>8</sup> John himself was not the light; he was only a witness to the light.*

Now, we'll place the English of this portion of text in the same setting we already used with the NIV example. Once again, try to envision these words being spoken by a man in a business suit standing in front of a group of businessmen. To make this test as effective as possible, it is advisable to imagine the situation and then read the text out loud.

*In the beginning the founder of our company already existed. He was with the chief investor, and he was an investor himself. He was in the beginning with the chief investor. He planned everything there is of the company. Nothing was done that he didn't plan. The company itself was his vision, and this vision provided goals for everyone in the company. The vision is growing and nothing can ever extinguish it.*

*The owner sent John the advertiser to inform people about the company known so that everyone might understand the vision because of his testimonials. John himself was not part of the company, he was only the advertiser of the company.*

Is this the kind of English people actually use? What would people think of a businessman who spoke in this way? What grade would a high school English teacher give to this speech?

Now, let's hear how the story sounds in the garb of the J. B. Philips translation which was one of the first Bible translations that was supposed to be in normal English:

*At the beginning of the company the owner expressed himself. That personal expression, that founder, was with the owner and was the owner, and he existed with the owner from the beginning of the company. The whole vision took place through him, and none of it took place without him. In him was the idea and this idea was the vision of the company. This vision made an impact on the public and the public never escaped it.*

*A man called John was sent by the owner as an advertiser for the vision of the company so that all who saw his ads might believe in the vision. This man was not responsible for the vision. He was sent simply as an advertiser of that vision.*

Keep in mind that both of these examples are from supposedly *modern* English translations. It should be obvious from these examples that the English used in so-called modern translations is clearly influenced by other sources. What would the speech by the businessman have sounded like in what actually is normal English? What follows is an example. Once again, imagine the situation and read it out loud.

*At the very beginning of the company, there was a founder who was not only associated with the chief investor at the time, but who was also an investor himself. That's the way it was when everything got started. The founder was the one who did all the planning without exception. He's the one who had the whole idea that became the vision of the company. This vision for the company kept growing, and it simply could not be suppressed.*

*Then a man was hired by the owner to market the company's vision. It was John, the prominent advertiser whom we all know, and it was his job to inform the public about the vision of the company. The goal was to convince people of its benefits. The company offered benefits to everyone in the society. John wasn't responsible for the vision of the company himself, but he's the one hired to advertise it.*

Didn't that seem more natural? The fact is that Bible translations don't have to be in strange forms of English. Why then do so many translations use such peculiar English? It doesn't even seem to matter if they are older versions or the modern ones. In the next chapter we're going to look at the source for this and other translating practices that are difficult to understand.

### **The failure to define readers**

One of the most blatant weaknesses of Bible translations is their failure to be designed for well-defined readers. Some translations go so far as to suggest that their translations can be

read and understood by any reader of English. Among such translations are those announcing that their translators come from a variety of English-speaking countries—the USA, Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand. The impression is given that such a broad geographic selection of translators assures that the English in the translations will be understood by anyone.

The mere fact, however, that English readers share many language codes among them is not at all an assurance that any specific text will be understood by a broad sampling of these readers. Any American who has ever traveled to England, for example, knows that parts of English newspapers are a puzzle. The sports pages have articles about sports that many Americans know little about. The political articles address issues and people that are completely foreign. The editorials contain words and concepts that make Americans shake their heads. The writers of the personal columns refer to places and local issues that make any American reader draw a complete blank.

Here and there an article might stand out in an English newspaper that is understandable to an American, but that's only because the American reader shares that particular network of language code that the English writer is using. It's as simple as that. Readers understand what they read not because they share a general language with a writer, but because they share the specific language codes used by a writer.

The language codes that a reader and writer must share to understand one another include all of the codes and coding procedures—situation, genre, prominence, rhetoric, reference, relation, and form codes. Newspapers from England particularly give American readers trouble because Americans are missing many of the situation codes. Situation codes include all the people, places, times, historical processes, settings, and cultural givens that writers expect their readers to already know. When a London writer refers to the *Tories*, he is not going to define that word. He expects his London readers to know exactly who that is. An American reader, whose political language codes may only include Republicans and Democrats, will not understand what kind of political creatures these Tories are. He might not even know that *Tory* is a political label.

We see that whether a text is in English or not can be completely irrelevant to the question as to whether that text will be understood by any particular English reader. It's important to understand not only the general language orientation, but also the specific language-code networks of a writing. In previous chapters, we have even seen how understanding is negatively affected if just a few language codes are not accurately translated or not correctly recognized.

To repeat: The understanding of any text requires that readers share the same networks of code used by the writer of the text. This fact alone should convince any translator to be very careful to have a well-defined reader in mind. Translators are not translating for themselves. It's of no consequence whether they can understand their own texts. The only test of the effectiveness of a translation is whether a particular reader understands it or not.

This is why there is no such thing as a good translation or a bad translation per se. Translations can never be evaluated apart from a reader. One translation may be good for one

reader and bad for another. A translation, for example, may be good for a college graduate from upper New York, but bad for a farmer in the Rio Grande valley of South Texas; another good for a seventy-year-old history professor but bad for a seventeen-year-old high school junior; still another good for Australian sailors but bad for Scottish housewives. Consider, too, that a particular translation might be good for a person who has studied the culture and times in which Christ lived and bad for a person who knows almost nothing about the Hellenistic world. In the same way, a certain translation might be good for a person who has the courage to swim against the stream of traditional religious thought but bad for a person who is sunk in religious tradition and doesn't know it.

Translators can never sidestep the fact that people are different because of the networks of language codes that they already have in their heads. If the "Bible" form of scripture translations represents the biggest myth about translations in the world of scripture translating, then the belief that there is such a thing as "translations that can be understood by anyone" is the biggest myth about the language used in scripture translations.

If Bible translators do not define the readers of their translations, then they have no basis for testing their translations. This is one of the most important tasks of any translator. Though Bible translations sometimes publish reader opinions about their translations, this has nothing to do with the linguistic testing of a translation among well-defined readers. Such testing is complex and requires a comprehensive approach. It is designed to ascertain exactly how translated texts are understood by particular readers, and to provide a well-documented record of the effectiveness of a translation.

Tools for translation testing among readers are available. Translators who work mainly among peoples with unwritten languages have developed effective approaches to testing the language used in their translations among readers. They are forced to do translation testing because their texts are the first to be translated into a language. They have no choice but to use words that the people in their target group actually use every day. Thus, they have had to devise ways to analyze the language of the readers and determine the best language codes to use when translating scripture texts.

This should be standard practice among all scripture translators. The result would be translations reflecting the language of actual readers.