5. Translate for Real Readers

It may seem obvious that a translation should be in the language of the readers, but Bible translators have a track record of forgetting that translating is always a two-way street. There's not only a written message that the translator has to analyze and understand, but there is also a reader who is supposed to understand that message. It's not enough for translators to analyze the message and then translate it so they personally find it understandable. Their task is to translate for others who will be reading the translation. Therefore, a translator also needs to be active in analyzing the language of the readers and testing the results to assure that the original message is still the original message when it's read in its new version.

This is simply to say that a translation ought to be in the language of the person who will actually be reading it. Though this may seem embarrassingly obvious, it is nevertheless one of the biggest problems of the Bible translations we've evaluated. None of them showed any evidence of being designed for a particular reader. Quite the opposite. Many of them claimed either explicitly or implicitly that the language of their translations was of such high quality that it could be understood by any reader of English.

Our evaluation (See Part II, Chapter 3) of reference codes, however, demonstrated that the English usage of these translations is more often strange and perplexing than of good quality. Plus, it was shown that the Bible translations exhibit more concern about maintaining the precedent of earlier translations than of using the everyday language and idioms of a well-defined group of readers. This is particularly evident when, in the attempt to preserve the language of previous translations, they are forced to stray far from normal English usage. The fact that the translations offer no documentation of linguistic tests or surveys to define and analyze a readership is further evidence that the Bible translations have no particular reader in view and have no intention of limiting their texts to a reader-specific reservoir of language codes.

There can be no doubt that failing to do reader analysis and define readers for a translation is a foundational weakness of Bible translations. A translator has two jobs to do that precede any credible job of translating. The first is text analysis and the second is reader analysis, and both have to be done thoroughly before a text can be translated accurately into the language of the readers.

How should reader analysis be done? Exactly what should be analyzed? What kind of data should result? How should the data be used when translating? These are the questions that have to be answered well to ensure that a translation truly reflects the language code of the reader.

People who speak the same language do not necessarily "speak the same language"

Most languages are actually conglomerations of many variations of a language, some of which are as different from one another as two distinct languages are. Some of the more common variations are the following:

> *Occupational*: Within the confines of medical institutions, airlines, engineering firms, software companies, law offices, and research institutes, variations of English are spoken which would be impossible for outsiders to understand. On their own turf it's just as difficult to understand farmers, factory workers, construction teams, plumbers, electricians, financial officers, and any of hundreds of other vocational groups. And for many of these people these languages are by no means sidelights to their lives. These are the main linguistic worlds in which they live. Outside the borders of their work they often feel a linguistic inadequacy that borders on illiteracy.

> It is not unusual to find even highly educated individuals who read very little outside their area of expertise. They may know next to nothing about computers, repairing a car, cooking, health matters, politics, etc. It is no wonder that such individuals have difficulties reading a Bible translation.

> *Regional, cultural*: There are many different brands of English in the world. Boys and girls who grow up in Australia, Ireland, India, Nigeria, and Israel will very likely grow up speaking English. So will the children in many other countries. Were these boys and girls to meet together, however, not all of them would necessarily find it easy to understand one another.

> Even English speakers from within the borders of an English-speaking country can speak the language in very different ways. African Americans from the panhandle of Florida, for example, do not speak like farmers from Vermont. Hispanics from El Paso do not speak like Midwesterners in Minneapolis. It is very unlikely that these people will all understand a passage in a Bible translation in the same way.

> *Educational:* Most school teachers recognize that children in their classes have varying linguistic capabilities. Obviously, much more can be expected of an eighth-grader than a second-grader, but even within a class the differences in reading ability can vary greatly. This is why it is standard practice in the educational system to adapt reading materials to levels of reading skill. Such differences are present to an even greater degree in the general population. (See pages 172-174 for more examples of language variation.)

The consequences of these observations for scripture translating are not difficult to surmise: A translation has to be adjusted to a reader's place on the spectrum of language variation. This is one of the requirements of what it means to define a reader. The definition has to include a reader's linguistic experience and expertise, a reader's degree of regional and cultural influence, and a reader's educational development. This is standard procedure by translators and writers active in many areas of public life. It is inexcusable that Bible translators ignore language variation.

Reader analysis requires intense involvement of the translator with the reader

In the same way that text analysis requires preparation, study, and effort on the part of the translator, so too does reader analysis require a similar involvement. Translating has not taken place until a text has been understood by a reader. It's much like a teacher's responsibility to communicate information to students, and then to test them to make sure that they understand. A translator has the same responsibility.

No teacher, for example, would ever walk into a classroom, hand a text to a student, and then walk out thinking the job was done. In the same way, producing a text is not the goal of a translator. The goal is that a reader understand the text, and reaching this goal always requires involvement with the reader.

The fact is that a translator can only do so much with a text to move it in the direction of a reader. Every text has its own degree of complexity and its own amounts of language networks that have to be understood by any reader of the text. A translator cannot produce a text that is substantially simpler than the demands of a text and still remain true to it. A text, for example, that deals with the principles of calculus, an advanced form of mathematics, cannot be translated for a person who only understands basic arithmetic. There will be too many words and concepts in the calculus text that will be far out of the realm of the networks of code in the reader's head. No amount of tinkering with the text will ever make it understandable for such a reader, because a text dealing with calculus cannot be translated by using only the basic words and concepts of arithmetic. It's impossible.

So what is the solution? The solution is to move the reader in the direction of the text. In order to understand information about calculus, a reader has to learn the networks of language code that will make that possible. A translator always has two options in the quest to translate a text. One is to adjust the text to the reader; the other is to adjust the reader to the text. The realities of communication almost always require that translators make abundant use of both options.

Observing translators at work in the real world demonstrates the truth of this process. These include teachers in a school, advertisers preparing presentations, translators working among international diplomats, and experienced employees training new workers. All of them can be observed focusing as much on the people for whom they are translating as on the content of what they have to translate. They are sensitive to the feedback they are getting as they communicate. Good translators will automatically adjust to the language and experience of the people they are working with. These day-in, day-out translators are not satisfied that they've done their job until they get the right responses from their target audience.

The same is true of the Wycliffe Bible translators. Their degree of involvement with the people for whom they translate is phenomenal. They have more staff members who work with the people in literacy training than staff who work with the texts of the scriptures. They all know that feedback is the name of the translating game. And there's one more thing that the Wycliffe Bible translators also know: The process of reader analysis and preparation takes a lot of time. It cannot be done in a few weeks or months. For them it is a commitment that can easily require years.

This is a further weakness of the institutional Bible translators in the western world, the ones who produce Bible translations like the ones that we have evaluated. Their track record in terms of reader analysis is practically nonexistent. The fact that they produce only one version of their translations is clear evidence that language variation is not a concern to them. It's no wonder that the English used in those single versions, made without reader analysis, does not correspond to the usage of any actual speakers of English anywhere.

There is no excuse for this. Wonderful tools of reader analysis have been created by educators, linguists, and translators in many areas in which communication plays a central role. The Wycliffe Bible translators are at the cutting edge of developing very effective linguistic tests, surveys, and other procedures designed to a wide range of linguistic fact finding and analysis. Such tools are not only needed among peoples with unwritten languages, but they are needed to the same degree among readers in the rest of the world.

Reader analysis should also determine a reader's networks of language codes

Reading skills are not the only requirement for understanding a text. Readers must also possess the networks of language code that are equal to the demands of the text. (See pages 172-174.)

It is often thought that reading is a skill that is learned when one is young. The assumption is that it mainly involves recognizing the letters, learning vocabulary, and understanding basic grammatical relationships. Supposedly, once these things are practiced and become natural, then a person has learned to read. But this is only true in a very limited sense. At best, it describes the very first steps of reading.

The reality is that the ability to read can only be measured in relationship to a particular text. A person may be able to read a children's novel, for example, but not understand an intricate science fiction novel. Another reader may comprehend a basic article in an encyclopedia about an animal, but not understand an article about the movements of the moon in the very next column.

In the first case, the sentences in the science fiction novel are too long and complex to follow. This is a problem of reading skill, and can only be solved by practice and gradual increases in complexity.

In the second case, the words and concepts in the moon article were unknown to the reader. This is a problem of a reader having deficient networks of language code.

What are networks of language code?

In order to understand individual numbers, for example, a person must understand the larger network of numerals and how they function. This would include the progressive nature of numbers; the decimal system of grouping of numbers in tens, hundreds, thousands, and so on. *A quarter after three* means nothing to a person who doesn't know how a clock functions to tell time. *Drive north on highway 16* will mean nothing to a person who does not know the

directions or who doesn't know how to read a map. To understand the details of days, weeks, months, and years, a person must understand how the calender system works. Even words as simple as mother and father only make sense when understood as a part of a network of family relationships.

The entire educational system is based on the fact that reading skills and reservoirs of language code must be increased in increments for learning to advance. First numbers are learned, for example, then arithmetic, then algebra, then trigonometry, etc., and always in this order. No one ever starts with trigonometry.

Certain networks of language code simply have to be in place before other more advanced codes can be learned. What is the consequence of this for translating the scriptures? This means that not every text can be translated for every reader. This is a fact that should be screamed and not just calmly stated in the middle of a paragraph. Let me repeat: Not every text can be translated for every reader.

No linguistic slight of hand can cause a reader to understand details that are parts of networks of code a reader has never learned. Jumping into the details of the solar system to a person who has never learned about the planets and orbits and interplanetary distances is meaningless. That person must first acquire the basic vocabulary and the necessary contextual overview (the basics of a network of language code) of the solar system to be able to make sense of words like *orbit, Neptune, gravity, space, atmosphere, satellite, galaxy*, and *planet.*

How much of a code network must a reader know? The text itself defines this. A text about the solar system written for children in elementary school will contain very basic concepts that are designed to introduce certain topics. Young readers will be able to read and understand it. An article about the solar system written in a scientific journal on the other hand will assume a great deal of understanding on the part of the readers. Children at elementary school level would not understand it.

Thus we see once again that adjusting the text is not always the solution to translating successfully. Very often the only option is *to adjust the reader*. That means bringing the reader up to the level of the demands of the text, not only in terms of dealing with its complexity, but also in terms of learning the necessary networks of code underlying the important details and concepts in the text.