

## 6. TRANSLATE USING ALL RELEVANT METHODS

Most books and articles about Bible translating make mention of two contrasting poles of translating philosophy. The first is most often referred to as word-for-word translating and is also often termed literal translating or formal equivalence translating. The other pole of translating philosophy is commonly called meaning-for-meaning translating and is sometimes referred to as paraphrasing, dynamic equivalence translating, functional equivalence translating, or idiomatic translating.

Translations such as *The King James Version*, *The New King James Version*, and the *New American Standard Bible* deem themselves to be literal translations. *The New Living Translation* presents itself as a meaning-for-meaning translation.

The impression most people have about these two approaches to translating is that word-for-word translating is the most accurate because it strictly orients itself to the source text, whereas meaning-for-meaning translating is less accurate but easier to read and understand because it orients itself to the language of the reader. These conclusions, however, are not necessarily shared by the translators in either of the two camps.

There are also translators who are of the opinion that both approaches have to be combined in a translation. The *Net Bible* translators reflect this standpoint. They write:

*No translation can ever achieve complete formal equivalence. Even a translation which sometimes reflects Hebrew and Greek word order at the expense of English style has to resort to paraphrase in some places. On the other hand, no translation achieves complete dynamic equivalence either. Thus this translation, like every other, ends up somewhere between the two extremes. (p. 2449)*

In broad strokes, these are the prevailing points of view concerning the main approaches to Bible translating: word-for-word, meaning-for-meaning, or something between the two. This general understanding is the reason why most interested observers figure if there are any real issues in scripture translating at stake today—apart from source text issues—then it can only be in the tension generated between the word-for-word and meaning-for-meaning camps of Bible translators.

Is this picture true? Are there only two general methods that a translator can choose when translating? And are Bible translations today really examples of one of these philosophies of translating? Or a mixture of the two? Are the literal translations really literal?

One quick observation resulting from our evaluation of Bible translations would speak against the two-method assumption. We uncovered a broad spectrum of problems with the translations and did not observe that these problems are typical of only certain translations. In fact, a word-for-word orientation or a meaning-for-meaning orientation seem quite irrelevant to the problems we uncovered. What difference does the literal-nonliteral issue make when genre codes are added to the text? Or when the genre codes are ignored? And what difference does it make to what degree a translation is literal or not literal when prominence codes are scrambled?

The fact is that choosing a literal approach to translating or a meaning-for-meaning approach is never a fundamental decision that a translator has to make. Experienced translators in the real world know that various approaches have to be used when translating a text from one language to another.

The main concern of a good translator is to make sure that the intended reader understands the text the way the author wants it to be understood. In order to do that, a translator must thoroughly understand the networks of language code used in the author's text as well as the networks of language code resident in the mind of the reader. This is the stuff out of which a translation has to be created. Whether a certain percentage of the translated text is literal or meaning-for-meaning is of little consequence.

A brief look into the mind of a translator will illustrate what I mean. First of all, any translator will use the word-for-word approach if at all possible. Who wouldn't jump at the chance to simply substitute words in one language for those in another? Sometimes that works without difficulty. Words like *mother* and *father*, for example, have perfect substitutes in almost all languages. It would be illogical not to use them. That is not always the case, however.

When translating a text, it can easily happen that ideal substitutions are not available for particular words, even quite common ones. Translating the English term *high school* into German, for instance, presents a real problem. The three German-speaking countries—Austria, Germany, and Switzerland—do not have schools for teenagers that are similar to an American high school. Teens in Austria, for example, attend *Gymnasien*, *Hauptschulen*, and various kinds of occupational and technical schools, none of which provides a good overlap for a US high school.

Trying a word-for-word translation does not work at all. The German equivalent of *high* is *hoch*, and the equivalent of *school* is *Schule*. The resulting term *Hochschule*, however, essentially means college or university in German.

If pressed a translator might choose the German word *Hauptschule* thinking it the kind of school closest to a US high school. Or he might use a small descriptive phrase in German that means something like *US school for fourteen-to-eighteen year olds*. In either case the translator will not be satisfied knowing that the translation is deficient both in terms of what it fails to communicate as well as what it wrongly communicates.

The first case is an attempt at a word-for-word translation that misses the mark, and the second case is a meaning-for-meaning translation that accomplishes only a shadow of the

meaning. A translator would soberly evaluate either of them as having attained only a certain percentage of the meaning.

Each translation manages, at best, steps in the right direction. If the deficient translation is in a portion of text in which the exact meaning of *high school* is not so crucial, then a not-so-accurate translation may prove satisfactory. If, however, the meaning of a larger section of the text depends on a comprehensive understanding of the term *high school*, then the partial translation could cause the whole unit to lead to false conclusions.

We see here how difficult translating can become. Situations can arise in which even a partial translation is virtually impossible, at least within the limitations of a particular text and a particular reader.

I once tried to translate the English word *quarterback* for an Austrian friend. The problem is that there is no such thing as a quarterback in Austria since American football is not known to most Austrians. So what German word was I supposed to use as a translation?

A literal translation of the words “quarter” and “back” would have been ludicrous. My friend would have understood something like “a fourth to the rear!” I had to use all sorts of creativity to manage the translation—including several long explanations—and even then, I’m sure, I only managed to transfer a small percentage of the meaning.

Not all translating is fraught with these kinds of problems. But neither is translating merely a technical matter that can always be accomplished by a person with training and experience. What the above examples illustrate is that translating is only possible within the framework of certain linguistic prerequisites. Because the Austrian in question had absolutely no knowledge of American football, he therefore had no corresponding network of language code in his own language that could serve as a basis for a translation. That is a prerequisite of effective translating; *corresponding networks of language code in both the source language and the target language*.

This prerequisite is not always available, however, and the problem increases with the degree of difference between two cultures. It’s interesting that even though America and Austria have many cultural similarities, there are nevertheless many translation problems that can arise between them involving even common terms like *high school* and *quarterback*.

It shouldn’t be difficult to imagine that the problems are considerably greater between two cultures separated by 2,000 years. This is the challenge facing a translator of the scriptures. No translator can expect to use one method of translating and come close to solving these kinds of translating challenges.

Are there other prerequisites that have to be fulfilled before effective translating can take place? There are many. Let’s go back to my Austrian friend and let’s say that instead of the word *quarterback* that I was trying to translate the word *fullback* instead. And let’s assume my friend just happened to be familiar with English soccer terms which is altogether common in Austria. In soccer there is also a player called a *fullback*.

Does this make the translation easier? Not at all. This overlap of terms actually complicates the translation process. The reason for this is that there will be a strong tendency for my Austrian friend to assume that there is some similarity between the two positions—that a fullback in American football is like a fullback in soccer. The fact is, however, that a fullback in soccer is mainly a defensive player, whereas a fullback in American football is exclusively an offensive player, and that is only the beginning of the many differences between the two.

In a case like this, a translator is not only faced with the task of transferring a piece of new information but also of avoiding a misconception that is programmed to take place. This is a very common problem in scripture translating. The problem arises because of the many “Bible” words that have become so familiar to readers.

A translator can easily be duped into using such words thinking that people understand them. But, in the same way that two people can understand a word like *fullback* in very different ways, so too are many words used in Bible translations understood differently by readers today than they were by readers in the first century.

A case in point is the word *Pharisee*. When people read that word they think they know what it means. It is familiar to them. Over many generations of usage, however, *Pharisee* has also become a normal English word with its own meaning. A *Pharisee* or *pharisaical* person is a hypocrite in English. In addition to this meaning, most readers also understand *Pharisee* to mean the *Jewish religious leaders who opposed Jesus*.

Both of these understandings—*Jewish religious leader* and *hypocrite*—represent problems for a translator whose task is to provide a present-day reader with a translation that communicates what a person living in the first-century really understood with the word *Pharisee*.

The meaning *Jewish religious leader* is too thin. It’s like translating the word *quarterback* with the word *athlete*. It’s not wrong but it greatly lacks content. In addition, associating Pharisees with hypocrisy is essentially erroneous. It’s not that there weren’t people in the first century who may have thought of the Pharisees as hypocrites, but to think that most people then considered Pharisees to be essentially hypocrites is just as ridiculous as thinking that people today think of medical doctors as being arrogant or school teachers as being know-it-alls.

The fact is that the general impression about Pharisees among the Jews was the exact opposite of hypocrisy. Most people actually had considerable respect for Pharisees because of their dedication to Israel, to the Law of Moses, and to learning. Many of Israel’s great men were Pharisees. Some were war heroes. Most were highly educated. For an average Jew living in Israel, the Pharisees were the equivalent of our scholars, theologians, pastors, bishops, patriotic soldiers, and even respected statesmen. In some cases there were Pharisees who wore several of these hats. The fact is that Pharisees were significant people in first-century Israel who commanded widespread respect in the general population.

It’s interesting that children’s Bibles today often depict the Pharisees as dark, evil-looking men with religious headgear who glare at Jesus with angry faces. This is an artists’ portrayal

of exactly what Pharisee has come to mean today: a hypocritical religious Jewish leader. It's much more the truth, however, that many of the Jewish onlookers would have seen Jesus as the one who was disrespectful and rude because he criticized and confronted their respected leaders.

Also, it is not completely true that the Pharisees were "Jewish" leaders in the pure sense of what that might mean to someone today. The role of a Pharisee had no roots in the Jewish scriptures. They were not authorized by any scriptural documents to be leaders. The Pharisees were the product of teachings and traditions that had come to dominate Jewish life at the time of Christ.

In this same sense many Christian leaders today are also creations of teachings and traditions that have no roots in the Christian scriptures. There are no such persons as theologians, seminary professors, archbishops, monsignors, cardinals, popes, reverends, or superintendents that are propagated in the scriptures. They are all creations of traditional teachings. It was no different with the Pharisees at the time of Christ.

Consider for a moment how threatening it might be for a translator to include words such as *theologian* or *those addressed as reverend* in a translation of *Pharisee*, even though these terms would add a realistic portion of meaning to the term as it was perceived by any Jew living in the first century. Most clergy today would undoubtedly not appreciate showing up in a scripture translation in the garb of a Pharisee, but that association is a much more substantial and realistic one than to simply go with the word *Pharisee* in a translation, knowing full well that a reader today will automatically read meaning into that word that is foreign to anything understood in the first century.

### **Not all translation problems can be solved by adding notes to the text**

Some would say that the answer to a problem like this is to place a note into the translation that clarifies the difficult term. Is this the solution? For some words and phrases a note can be adequate. Technical terms such as monetary units, military ranks, geographic locations, and all things requiring little more than a brief definition fall into this category. Including notes of this sort has been standard practice by writers and translators through the centuries. The scriptures themselves have many examples of an author offering brief clarifications for the reader. (*They said, "Rabbi" — which means teacher — "where are you staying?"* John 1:38b)

Merely adding notes to the text, however, is inadequate for complex terms and for terms that carry with them the potential for serious misunderstandings. Let's look for a moment at a translation that makes an extensive use of notes. If notes offer the solution for clearing up all misunderstandings then the *Net Bible* would certainly qualify as the clearest translation on the market. Whereas most translations make a sparse use of notes, the *Net Bible* outdoes even the most prolific Study Bibles by peppering the text with over 60,000 notes.

As has been mentioned before, many of the notes are helpful, particularly those dealing with relation codes and with detailed technical issues. Many of the other notes, however, are of little help to a reader, particularly those dealing with complex issues.

The following study note is from Romans 2:12 in the Net Bible and is attached to the word *law*:

<sup>13</sup>*sn* This is the first occurrence of *law* (*nomos*) in Romans. Exactly what Paul means by the term has been the subject of much scholarly debate. According to J. A. Fetzmyer (Romans [AB], 131-35; 305,6) there are at least four different senses: (1) figurative, as a “principle”; (2) generic, meaning “a law”; (3) as a reference to the OT or some part of the OT; and (4) as a reference to the Mosaic law. This last usage constitutes the majority of Paul’s references to “law” in Romans.

Does this clear up anything for a common reader? First of all, how will a reader make any sense of something that is a cause of “much scholarly debate?” Secondly, what exactly is supposed to be the significant difference among the last three options? And finally, when readers now meet that word *law* throughout Romans and indeed in other places in the scriptures, how are they supposed to know what law is in view, and how will this note somehow provide the necessary insight?

Law is a crucial concept in the scriptures. It had a particular understanding among the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans. Does this note, which is quite extensive for a Bible translation, clarify the issue or confuse it?

What would an Austrian who knows little about American football conclude about the word *quarterback* were he to be given a similar kind of information about that word in a footnote? Would it help him to be told that *quarterback* can be used in American English (1) figuratively, as a particular kind of role player; (2) generically, meaning “a team position”; (3) as a reference to a player on a football team or some part of a football team; and (4) as a reference to the exalted, almost heroic position in the NFL. Of what use is such information?

The point is that both terms—*law* in the scriptures and *quarterback* in the American sports culture—are far too complex and weighted to be clarified by a note in a translation. The fact is that there are many matters in the world—and certainly in the code networks of the scriptures—that cannot be explained by many pages of notes.

Does this mean that certain portions of scriptures are impossible to translate? The answer to this question is often *yes*, but it completely depends on what reader is in view. The more networks of code a reader shares with a writer of scripture, the easier it is to make a translation for that person. Conversely, the fewer language codes a reader shares with a writer, the more difficult it is to translate for that person. Unfortunately most readers of the scriptures not only share too few codes with the writers of scripture, but they harbor networks of code that mislead them in their understanding of many of the words and concepts that they do read.

So, what’s the solution? Obviously, a translator needs to be concerned just as much about how a translation is perceived by a reader as about the fidelity of the text of the translation itself. It’s easy, for example, to translate the many Jewish words and concepts that populate the scriptures for a reader who has a good understanding of the world of the Jews in Judea of the first century. But it’s difficult to translate the same words for a reader who understands

little of that world, and it's even more difficult to translate for a reader who harbors many misconceptions about that world.

Unfortunately, most readers of scripture fall in the last two categories, not only concerning the world of the Jews, but the many other aspects of first-century life that permeate the writings of scripture. Translating texts of the scriptures for such readers is not only difficult but often impossible. The only alternative in such a situation is for the translator to assist the reader to take steps to learn the networks of language code necessary for understanding a text. People have to realize that a translated text can often only do so much for a reader. In these situations it's useless to try to get more out of the text. The better option is to try to get more out of the reader. In some instances of translating, dealing with the needs of a reader can require just as much analysis and preparation as dealing with the same tasks in a text.

The point is that translating needs to be understood in a much larger sense than simply making the choice between word-for-word or meaning-for-meaning translating. Effective translating is a matter of recognizing how to best translate each portion of text in relation to a particular reader. And sometimes it means recognizing that no amount of trying to construct an understandable text is possible and that the only solution is to prepare the reader to understand the text.

One of the most effective ways of translating is treated in the following chapter. It involves the implicit text, the text that is internal to the writer and the reader.