

7. TRANSLATE THE IMPLICIT TEXT

The meaning-for-meaning translations of the scriptures are seen in many circles as the most significant advancement in Bible translating in almost 500 years. A new breed of linguists in the early twentieth century plowed the ground for new ways of translating. Their approaches came to have many names—*dynamic equivalence translating*, *functional equivalence translating*, *paraphrasing*, *idiomatic translating*, *thought-for-thought translating*, and *meaning-for-meaning translating*.

What the linguists promised was translating that did away with the formal texts and artificial expressions that struck modern readers as distant and detached. In addition, readers were assured that translating meaning-for-meaning rather than word-for-word was a much more logical and effective approach, because it wasn't words that were the main units of understanding, but the meanings expressed by larger units of language.

The arguments of the new Bible translators were convincing, and they produced an impressive array of translations along with literature explaining the new linguistic insights undergirding the translations.

These new linguists and the translations that they spawned came under heavy attack in the early years of their existence. The criticism toward them ran from heresy to frivolity and all shades of derision in between. Even today, voices that revile the modern translations can still be heard, but they are decidedly in the minority. For the most part, the modern-language translations have enjoyed great success and they took their place alongside the older translations on the shelves of Christian book stores.

Today, in spite of the earlier hostilities, a kind of mutual attraction has taken place between the older, more literal versions and the contemporary, meaning-for-meaning translations. Some of the old standbys freshened up their image and now praise their new-found interest in expressing old truths in a new garb. The newer translations, on the other hand, which once approached meaning-for-meaning translating with radical abandon, are now reining themselves in, suddenly convinced that the literal approach is not necessarily all bad. They take pains to assure readers that their forays into functional-equivalency translating are limited only to those passages in which it is absolutely necessary.

Much of this reaching out to embrace one another, however, is more evident in the press releases of the various translations than it is in their actual texts. We observed, for example, the obvious dichotomy between the text of the *New International Version* and its own description of that text. (See page 90.) In promotions, the *NIV* claims to be contemporary, finely tuned for the modern reader, and characterized by a marvelous clarity, whereas the

actual text of the *NIV* demonstrates twenty different categories of linguistic miscues, including anachronistic and archaic formulations. And we saw that this was only a beginning of the problems in the *NIV*.

The meaning-for-meaning translations such as the *New Living Translation* also suffer from the dichotomy between what they promise and what they deliver. At their inception, the translations of the new linguists gave cause to hope that one day they would take the necessary steps so needed in scripture translating, and that they would dare to shed the traditional influences of the past. Many of the linguistic principles they were following were sound, and the meaning-for-meaning goal in translating was a much more realistic approach than the word-for-word orientation of older translations.

Unfortunately, the newer translations were never able to escape the powerful gravity of the authorized versions. The result is that these translations seldom became anything more than idiomatic mimics of the older translations. They did nothing to remedy the problems of the genre codes and the prominence codes, and they stopped short of becoming true meaning-for-meaning translations. They simply became modern-language versions whose main contribution was to update the vocabulary used in the older translations. Otherwise, they repeated the basic failings of their predecessors.

There are many reasons why the new translations never fulfilled their potential. Among their shortcomings are the same problems that plague other translations such as a dependence on previous translations and the failure to design translations for actual readers. But there is another significant reason why the meaning-for-meaning translations never lived up to their promise. It's a reason that is intensely linguistic in nature, and this makes it very perplexing because it was linguists who were the prime movers of the new translations. If anyone should not have made a linguistic mistake, it was the linguists.

The problem was not a small one. It had to do with the word *meaning*, a concept that was central to everything they were doing. Though they all emphasized the importance of *meaning* and the importance of making sure that it was the *meaning* of the original text that was translated, the translators of the new translations never managed to clearly understand exactly what the "meaning" was that they were so convinced they should pass on.

The meaning of meaning

The general impression most people have is that meaning is somehow contained in a text as though each word and each expression were injected with meaning. Therefore, it is assumed that to translate a text in another language, it simply requires constructing the same text as closely as possible in the target language.

The problem with this understanding of meaning is that it is based on a wrong perception of how language works. Meaning is not somehow *contained* in a word or a phrase or even a sentence. Meaning does not somehow accompany a piece of language code as it is passed back and forth. Instead, words and phrases and other language units serve to "trigger" meanings that already have to be in a person's memory. If the meaning is there, stored away

and ready to be used, then it can be activated and displayed on the monitor of the mind. If it is not there, nothing happens and the screen comes up blank. This may seem complicated but it is quite simple to demonstrate.²

Let's say, for example, that I tell someone not to be so *avaricious*. What does that mean?

If the person I'm talking to does not already know what *avaricious* means, no amount of looking at the word will ever reveal the meaning. The meaning has to be a part of a person's up-to-date inventory of meanings so that when the word is mentioned, it can be matched to the meaning which is filed away and waiting to be called up when needed. (See page 3.)

In other words, for a person to understand the meaning of a word, that meaning has to already be lurking in the person's head, ready to jump out and make itself known as soon as its name is called. That's how language works. When people talk, they do not pass information back and forth. That's not how communication functions. Instead they use the codes and coding procedures of language to locate meanings that are already loaded in a person's mind. The way language codes and coding procedures work to do this is explained in detail in *Part I* of this book.

What is the consequence of understanding *meaning* in this way for a translator?

Consider the following German sentence: *Hannes soll seinen Vater anrufen*. A normal "literal" translation of this sentence is *John should call his father*. Now let's look at typical meaning-for-meaning translation of this sentence: *Johnny needs to give his father a call*. This gives the sentence a more idiomatic slant and adds some of the rhetoric coding of the original sentence. (*Johnny* is a more idiomatic version of *Hannes* than the translation *John*.)

Is this second translation actually more of a meaning-for-meaning translation than the first? No it isn't. The second translation simply says the first translation in a different, more modern way. A true meaning-for-meaning translation would look like this: *John Smith, who lives on Cherry Street in Denver, should call his father, Herman Smith, on the telephone*.

This sentence is the meaning of the original sentence because this translation answers the important questions about the meaning of the words and the sentence as a whole. Who is *John*? Who is his *father*? What does *call* mean? In the context of the request, the person speaking knew that the person being spoken to knew exactly which John of all the possible Johns in the world was meant, and who John's father was. He also knew that *call* did not mean holler at his father or request that he should lay his cards on the table (a poker term), but use the telephone to make contact with him.

All this information is what linguists call implicit information. And implicit information is always the actual meaning of language codes. (See pages 21-23.)

² Meaning comes not only from what a person already knows. The context of a writing also provides a very significant input to the meaning of language codes. Nevertheless, a person's reservoir of understanding is basic to the functioning of all language codes, and without it even the context of a writing would be useless.

The speaker said *John*, and he actually meant *John Smith*. The person he was talking to knew that as well. Potentially, *John* could mean any one of thousands or even millions of Johns. It only meant one, however, and that was the John Smith who lives on Cherry Street in Denver.

When a translator provides implicit information, it is information that is truly part of the text. It is there because it was there for the speaker and for the person being addressed. It is what they understood when the word *John* was uttered. Each of them understood *John Smith on Cherry Street in Denver*. That is the *meaning* of the word. A true meaning-for-meaning translation includes this information particularly for someone who does not know what particular *John* the speaker was referring to. It is a translation in which the explicit text (*Hannes soll seinen Vater anrufen*) is expanded to include the implicit text (*John Smith should give his father, Herman Smith, a call with the telephone*)

The first two translations are actually nothing but repetitions of the explicit text. *John should call his father* and *Johnny needs to give his father a call* do not translate the meaning of the German sentence for a person who does not know that *John* is *John Smith from Cherry Street in Denver*, that *his father* is *Herman Smith*, and that *call* means to *use the telephone*. For a person without this knowledge both translations are deficient. Neither tells the reader what the sentence meant when it was uttered. In this case, all it can possibly mean is that some John was told to call his father in some sort of a way. That's it. Nothing more could be understood by the reader.

The only way that a true meaning-for-meaning translation can be achieved is if a translator includes as much of the implicit text in a translation as possible. This is not a matter of adding information to the original text. It is a matter of *expanding* the explicit text to include the *implicit* text which is just as much a part of the text as is the explicit text. (See pages 21-23.) The implicit text is in fact the actual meaning of the text, because it is the implicit text that the explicit text is designed to produce in the mind of the reader.

What it means to expand a text

Expanding the written text means that a translator replaces the explicit text with necessary portions of implicit text. Let's say, for example that I am translating a German article into English and I run across the German term *Hundertjähriger Krieg*. This can easily be translated into English as the *Hundred Years' War*. This is a translation of the explicit text. It is what most people would call a literal translation. For a history buff this might be a good translation, but for someone who has never heard of the *Hundred Years' War*, it means very little. (And who would ever guess that the war actually lasted 116 years!)

To help someone better understand the meaning of the term, I could expand the phrase by translating it in this way: *The Hundred Years' War which lasted from 1337 to 1453 and was a struggle for the control of France*.

Is this translation more precise or less precise than the translation of the explicit text? It is obviously *more* precise particularly for a reader who knows nothing about the war. Is the expanded information somehow illegitimate or untrue? Absolutely not. It is a part of the

implicit language code that the term *Hundred Years War* refers to. It is, in fact, part of what a person knowledgeable about this particular war would understand when reading the language code. It is part of the meaning that would be projected in that person's mind when reading the phrase. It is the content of the file stored in that person's memory under the tag *Hundred Years War*. Adding even more details about the *Hundred Years' War* would once again increase the accuracy of the translation, not lessen it.

A translation that expands the explicit text to include the implicit text is not a meaning-for-meaning translation in the sense of what that has come to mean in the world of Bible translating. Bible translations that claim to be meaning-for-meaning *should* be expanded-text translations, but those translations that present themselves as meaning-for-meaning translations are in reality hardly different than the so-called literal translations. Rather than expanding the explicit text to include implicit meaning, they often do little more than use more up-to-date words and phrases to translate the explicit text. It would be much more proper to call both kinds of translations *explicit text* translations.³

Many examples of the similarities between literal translations and meaning-for-meaning translations can be seen in *Part II* in which many passages from various translations are compared. One of the translations that was evaluated, the *New Living Translation*, claims to be a meaning-for-meaning translation, and yet its texts demonstrate essentially the same texts as the other translations and have the same deficiencies as the so-called literal translations.

Using the implicit text in translating

A text can be expanded to various degrees depending on the needs of the reader. Let's say, for example, that the phrase *Hundred Years' War* in the article was mentioned in regard to Eduard III of England. This is significant because it was Eduard who actually started the war. His mother was the sister of three French kings, and he saw himself as the true king of France. Mentioning this in the translation in addition to the basic facts about the war would explain the connection between the war and Eduard III which the writer of the article was assuming the readers knew. Including that information, expands the explicit text to include parts of the implicit text, and allows the reader to know what the original readers understood when reading the text.

The question arises: When has a translator added information to the text that the author never intended to be there? "Expanding the text" sounds a lot like adding information to the text.

Information added to the text is information that contextually differs from anything the author could have meant or from anything one of the first readers could have understood. The use of anachronistic words by many so-called literal translations is actually an example of adding unwarranted information to the text of the scriptures. An anachronistic word causes readers

³ An expanded text translation should not be confused with a translation by Kenneth S. Wuest that was published in the fifties and entitled *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*. This translation does not fulfill the requirements of a translation that expands a text for a well-defined reader, and it exhibits all the same deficiencies as other Bible translations.

to understand a word in a way that is foreign to anything the original writer could have meant or that an original reader could have understood.

Bible translations also demonstrate other kinds of added information that have nothing to do with a text of the scriptures. When, for example, the first part of the writing to Theophilus is called a *Gospel* and the second part is titled the *Book of Acts*, this is added information. It never was a part of what the writer meant or what the first readers understood when they read the explicit text of the writing.

On the other hand, words that expand a network of language code, are not added codes but codes that actually are part of the implicit text both intended by the author and understood by the first readers. To translate a particular instance of ο λογος as *the Logos who is Christ* is not adding information to the text but expanding the text to include its implicit meaning.

Further importance of the implicit text

There is another reason why a literal translation of a piece of literature—or an *explicit text* translation as we are now calling it—cannot be considered the same as the *meaning* of a text. This is because all language codes have to pass through the filter of an individual reader's mind. The resulting text displayed in the mind of the reader is always a different text than the explicit text that the reader observes. (See pages 21-23.)

In this sense, all translations and indeed all written texts end up being personally adjusted translations. Linguists suspect that no two readers see a text in precisely the same way, simply because no two readers have the same sets of language files stored in their memories. All the codes of a language can do is call up files of information that are already resident in a reader's mind. The content of those files can be similar to those of other readers, but they can also be significantly different. Even a common word like *father* can be perceived in various ways by different people. Children who grow up with a gentle father will automatically see that word in a different light than children who grow up with an abusive father.

This is why the actual text in front of a reader is only one of the texts that a translator should check for accuracy. The other is the text being projected on the mind of the reader. And it's this text that constantly has to be tested for accuracy.

Testing the implicit text

How does a translator observe a text that is internal to the reader? Though it sounds complicated, this is actually a much more wide-spread skill than one would imagine. Consider a teacher working with boys and girls in a classroom. In front of the pupils is a text. It could be a mathematical text, a history text, or a science text. The goal is that the pupils understand what the text is saying.

It's through questions, quizzes, and conversations that the teacher probes the degree to which the written text is being correctly perceived by the readers. It's an ongoing process of

explanation and feedback. Problems are noted. Misconceptions are corrected. Additional information is provided where necessary. Illustrations are offered. Some of the readers learn quickly, others are slow. Some are distracted, some are interested. Some act like they understand, but really don't. Others are confused, and still others are bored.

All of this is translating, and the teacher is a translator at work. It is not unusual for a teacher to have to communicate the meaning of one text to a roomful of very different individuals. The translator-teacher knows the text well and the goal is to somehow get a satisfactory facsimile of that text projected onto the internal display of each child's mind. Any teacher knows that getting that job done can be very different from person to person. One of the methods a teacher (and translator) uses in this process is to expand the written text in various ways so it delivers the necessary information that a particular reader needs.

This is translating as it should take place. This is translating that does not stop with an explicit text but aims for the understanding of the implicit text. Expanding a text is even a task that a reader can personally tackle with some success depending on the reader's capabilities to do research.

Readers can also track down implicit information

If readers cannot understand a text because there are too many language codes that are unfamiliar, they can look elsewhere to locate this information for themselves. It might be available in a dictionary, a lexicon, or some other source. People don't often think of such basic research as "expanding the text" but that's exactly what it is if it is done accurately.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the word *avaricious*. The point I made is that people already have to know the meaning of a word, or it will mean nothing. Only readers who already know what *avaricious* means will be able to locate its meaning in their memory. There is nothing in the word itself that will reveal its meaning. Readers, however, could obtain this information by looking in a dictionary. Those who do this will discover that *avaricious* means *greedy for riches*. This is not an addition to the text, it is an expansion of the text.

Expanding a text is the most logical approach to helping a reader understand a text. It's a method used the world over by teachers, translators, and researchers. There is no reason why it should not be used by translators and readers of the scriptures. The implicit text is the text referred to by the reference codes in the explicit text. The implicit text is the text the writer intended and that the original reader most likely understood when reading the explicit text.

Using implicit and explicit translations together

It is interesting that teachers or translators can often be heard giving the following advice to people interested in learning the scriptures: *Use various translations, including in particular a literal one and a meaning-for-meaning one, because they complement one another. The one is a help with accuracy and the other is a help with meaning.*

In general, this is advice that is well meant. The only problem is that the so-called literal translations on the market are neither literal nor accurate, and the meaning-for-meaning translations are little more than modern language versions of the literal translations. Both could be better called explicit-text translations. Thus, neither of the two translations provide the breadth of information that people think they do. The literal translation is not a direct tie to the source text and the meaning-for-meaning translation is not a direct tie to the meaning of the implicit text.

This does not mean, however, that the advantage of using two very different translations is not real. A translation that reflects the source text and a translation that reflects the implicit text would be wonderful tools for a person who wants to be a student of the scriptures. The source-text translation, however, must be a code-for-code translation like the *English Code Text* to be a true reflection of the original texts. (See page 130.) And the translation expressing the meaning of the original text should be a translation of the implicit text and should be adapted to a particular target group or to an individual reader.

Explicit-text translations are not without value, assuming, of course, that they are done without the deficiencies pointed out in *Part II*. Explicit-text translations could serve as general summaries of the *English Code Text* and they could be adequate texts for students who understand the implicit information that was shared by the authors and the original readers.

The *English Code Text* along with an explicit-text translation and a reader-specific expanded-text translation would give a reader the truly broad spread of information that people often assume is available with the so-called literal translations and the meaning-for-meaning translations.

There is a limit to the amount of text that can be expanded

Sometimes a text simply assumes so much knowledge that it would require a great deal of information to fill in what is missing for a reader. In such cases it is better to encourage a reader to do the study necessary to acquire the networks of language code that are missing.

The point is that people can only understand a writing if many important language codes of that writing correspond to networks of code that are already in the mind of the reader. If not, then simply looking at the words and sentences will accomplish nothing. No understanding will be possible until the necessary networks of language code are learned by the reader.

Translating of this sort requires a close interaction between a translator and a reader or between a translator and a well-defined target group. This process of translating then becomes very similar to the previous example of a teacher working individually with students.

This may seem impractical, but only because Bible translating is not normally done in this way. There are many precedents for this kind of translating. There was one prominent translator in particular who once demonstrated how to use every translating skill and every

translating approach to the optimum. His commitment to original sources and to working intensely with recipients spanned the whole spectrum of what translating is all about. His name? Jesus Christ. And it's perplexing why Bible translators have chosen not to closely follow the example of this greatest of all translators. In the following chapter, we will examine his example.