

AIMS AND PRINCIPLES OF TRANSLATION FOR THE BSL BIBLE

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Preface

This paper is first of all for the trustees, advisors and translation teams, and other interested parties: it is an attempt to describe and define the aims and principles of our version, but it is also a discussion document and a work in progress.

The two boxed sections, ‘Aims’ and ‘Guiding Principles’, contain draft summaries of the aims and principles of the BSL translation (in its pilot stage). These may be all you choose to read or need to read. It might be useful if both of these have some official sanction from the September 2009 meeting if the Trustees agree, but this can be provisional.

- The first summary box may offer some expressions we could use in marketing, but we should acknowledge the SIL source (footnoted) if we do.
- The second summary box is a work in progress which the teams and sub-group need to review from time to time: some of the principles are a bit contentious and linguistically rather complex (because they are careful).

Following these is explanation and discussion of the aims and principles. These sections could be seen as mine, as one consultant on the Project, rather than the Project’s – and this would probably be simpler in terms of official approval. Trustees and advisors may not need to engage fully with these, though I should be pleased to have some feedback and criticism, especially from members of the translation teams. These parts are intended for those inside or outside the project who would value some discussion of these principles and problems, and I would rewrite it for different target readerships. It needs more and fuller examples of the problems encountered, but I would prefer to include these when we have some part of the BSLV of Mark available for people to view, that I can refer them to by chapter and verse.

Aims

The translators seek the **closest natural equivalence**¹ in BSL to the meaning, expression and style of a biblical text.

The BSL Bible aspires to be a version which is

1. **accurate**: reproducing as exactly as possible the meaning of the source text;
2. **natural**: using natural forms of BSL in a way that is appropriate to a version of this text;
3. **communicative**: expressing all aspects of the meaning in a way that is readily understandable to the intended viewers.²

Some Guiding Principles

Because the BSL Version attempts to give the **closest natural equivalence** in BSL to the source text's meaning, expression and style, the translators will therefore:

- change **verse order** or sequences of words only where the meaning is conveyed more naturally, and as accurately, in the changed order;
- express, to the best degree possible, the **implicit meaning** of the text, the connotations, rhetorical impact, and emotive style of the original text, as part of its message;
- use two particular bodies of knowledge or **sources of implicit meaning** to guide the act of translation when there are 'gaps' to be read or implicit meaning to be taken into account: the probable historical and cultural context of the author and the target readership, and the message of the whole section or book being translated;
- consider **theological traditions** that have influenced understandings of aspects the text: and where there is a natural equivalence in BSL which is both accurate to the text and inclusive of such theological understanding, this translation may be preferred;
- ... *(bullets to be added or revised, as work in progress).*

¹ Eugene A. Nida, and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969 /1982), p. 12.

² For all three of these criteria, see: SIL International, *Translation Theory and Practice* (<http://www.sil.org/TRANSLATION/TrTheory.htm>, 2009).

Some details concerning the Aims

“Translation... consists of studying the lexicon, grammatical structure, communication situation, and cultural context of the source language text, analyzing it in order to determine its meaning, and then reconstructing this same meaning using the lexicon and grammatical structure which are appropriate in the target language and its cultural context”.³

Text and Exegesis

The first task of the translators is to discover the meaning of the original text. Our text for the pilot translation of the Gospel of St Mark is the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* and the 4th Revised Edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament. (This is the eclectic version using all the best available manuscripts, and most recent versions of the New Testament follow it.) We focus first on what Mark seems to have meant, and the meaning that would have been accessible to the first readers/audience of the text.

Natural Equivalence

Then we seek equivalent BSL ways of expressing the meaning of the original text. At the same time, we seek expression in natural BSL. A good translation is natural in terms of forms used in the target (or receptor) language. A translation should not appear like a translation, but like any other good, natural speech, writing or presentation in that language.⁴ It is professionally believed that the best translations are made by individuals who are native speakers of the target language, by people who are sensitive to proper grammar and word combinations in their own language.⁵ The translation team then needs to choose the natural equivalent that best matches and expresses the style and expression of the Greek text. The ambition is to communicate many of the characteristics of the source text (such as style, modes of expression, emotional charge).

Acceptance

Translation teams review the draft translation (which is filmed) and approve it for focus groups and back translators to see, and these comment on (among other things) the linguistic naturalness. Accuracy is measured by the degree to which users of a translation get the same meaning from it which the original text had, and this is researched in two key ways:

- a) the translation is field-tested among a range of users of the target language;⁶
- b) Biblical scholars (one who has been involved in the translation team and others who have not) read the back-translations and comment on their correspondence to the Greek text.

The translation may then be approved or revised in the light of these evaluations.

³ Mildred L. Larson, *Meaning-based translation: a guide to cross-language equivalence* (2nd ed. Lanham, MD: University Press of America and Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1998), p.3.

⁴ Wayne Leman, 'Translation Maxims' (<http://bible-translation.110mb.com/maxims.htm>, 2005).

⁵ E.g. Leman 'Translation Maxims'

⁶ Cf. Leman, 'Translation Maxims'

Some discussion of the Principles

The tension between literal and dynamic translation

Most translations are a necessary compromise between two methods, 'form equivalence' and 'function equivalence'.

Form-equivalent translation (often called 'literal' or sometimes 'semantic' translation) is wherever possible a word-for-word translation. It tries to reproduce literary features of the original text and the order of words and phrases (or verses) in the original. It tries to repeat the use of the same word or sign in the target language every time to translate a particular word in the original text. This method is useful if you want to consult a detailed commentary discussing the original language or the literary form. Word-for-word translation does not necessarily increase *accuracy* and indeed it can often miss the real meaning.

Function-equivalent translation (often called 'dynamic equivalence' and sometimes characterised as 'communicative' translation) describes the attempt to transfer the same meaning and impact to a modern reader than the source text would have had to its original readers. It departs from a literal translation for a number of reasons, such as where words have no direct equivalent in the target language, or where words have several meanings, or there are differences in grammatical conventions, or there are idioms and metaphors that do not mean anything in the target context. With this method you often lose features of the original form, particularly in poetic passages (or in proverbs and parables).

Mainstream English translations of the Bible such as KJV, NRSV and NIV attempt to be as literal or form-equivalent as they can, where they can without loss of meaning; but they all use strategies of dynamic equivalence too. The influence of the KJV (which is the most literal of these) on subsequent translations and on the very language used in the English-speaking church is considerable, and many English versions of the Bible consequently use words that people outside of the Bible-reading Church rarely or never use. These translations can therefore all, sometimes, be more 'accurate' in terms of their source language than 'natural' in English. The GNT (formerly called TEV and GNB) was originally translated for speakers of English as a second language and is an example of more thoroughly 'dynamic equivalence'. It is to a large degree in a natural English. It has a claim to being accurate in terms of meaning, but thought-for-thought rather than word-for-word.

We have described our translation in the phrase 'closest natural equivalence': this is a phrase used by translation theorists⁷ to combine something of both aspirations: to be accurate but also to be natural. In closest natural equivalence, 'meaning and naturalness are equal partners.'⁸

Biblical translators in particular face a tension between the literal and the dynamic, or between form and function. The Christian tradition of the sacredness of the Bible as 'the Word of God' exercises a constraint on most biblical translators on departing far from the 'actual words' of the text. This is in spite of the fact that the Bible has always been translated, and the Christian theological understanding that the Bible is not less

⁷ It originates with Nida and Taber, *Theory and Practice of Translation*, p. 12.

⁸ God's Word to the Nations, 'Translation process of God's Word for scholars' (http://www.godsword.org/cgi-bin/gwstore.cgi?cart_id=9940795_21571&page=scholar3.htm, 1995).

‘the Word of God’ in any subsequent language. The BSLV translators respect that a conservative impulse of carefully preserving and handing on specific words is part of a tradition of biblical interpretation: this is discussed further under ‘Theological traditions’.

Implicit meaning and ‘reading the gaps’

The usual aim of good translation is that an intended readership, unfamiliar with the source text, should be able to understand it. Our aim that our translation should express ‘all aspects of the meaning in a way that is readily understandable to the intended viewers’ is an ambitious one. There are particular problems with such an aim with ancient texts.

Where the source text is an ancient text, such as the Gospel of Mark, questions of the different cultural context of the source language and the target language can increase the problems of re-expressing the meaning in a way that is *readily accessible* in the target language, and also increase the problems of communicating *all* aspects of the meaning. Some things were not made explicit in words to the first readers of a text because they already knew a meaning lying behind the words used. ‘Meaning is often not explicitly expressed in one language, because there are cultural clues making it unnecessary to do so’.⁹ That implicit meaning can be just as much a part of the meaning of an utterance as the explicit syntax and grammar.

If we belonged to the culture in which and for which the text was written, we could probably ‘read the gaps’ in the way intended by the author. It is likely that a modern reader will be sometimes surprised and puzzled at the meaning the text has – a meaning more accessible to the first readers than to us. A good translation attempts to carry as much of the implicit meaning as it can, but this is sometimes not possible – without adding footnotes or a similar commentary explaining what the first readers might have understood on reading this.

With ancient texts especially, it is important not to ‘read the gaps’ by adding our own cultural perceptions into the meaning of the text. We are not the first readers of the text and it is the meaning that was accessible to *them* that we are first of all trying to grasp. There are still further problems here with Biblical translation because many Christian readers will bring with them to the reading of (say) the Gospel of Mark what they have learned is the meaning of the Gospel and the whole Bible. There is a danger in dogmatic traditions that later readers ‘fill in the gaps’ with what they believe the text means. Indeed, the creeds of the Church were composed in large measure to assist Christians to understand what the Bible means. However, the creeds of the Ecumenical Councils were not available to the first readers of Mark’s Gospel, so their explanations of Trinity and Christology (for example) could not be, precisely, what filled the gaps for them as they read Mark’s account of Jesus. To say this is not to claim that the creeds have misinterpreted the biblical revelation, but that the translators’ task is first to offer to new readers the meaning or meanings of the text that were accessible to the first readers. It is not the translators’ job to insert ideas, even good ones, which are not in the original text.

Connected to this filling of the gaps with later doctrinal understanding, is the BSL vocabulary of religious language used in church communities. This also contributes to the impulse towards an attempt, sometimes erroneous, at ‘literal’ translation. BSL

⁹ Leman, ‘Translation maxims’.

is not unique in this: a portion of church language in English is not really natural English, but a sort of church dialect or technical jargon that is very meaningful to insiders who know or believe something that is not in the text itself, but not meaningful to all other English speakers. (For example, the English word 'baptise' is just a transliteration of a Greek word, not a natural equivalent – we really have to know what the Greek word meant to understand the English translation of it.) For the Deaf in many churches both theological statements and on-the-spot translations of the Bible can be rendered using some of this 'church dialect' in sign-supported English rather than natural BSL. A genuinely visual-spatial theological discourse is needed for a BSL Bible translation, which does not import explanations or interpretations that are not what the text meant to the first readers. This is ambitious.

There are two particular bodies of knowledge or sources of implicit meaning which may legitimately, though tentatively, be used to guide the act of translation when there are 'gaps' to be read or implicit meaning to be taken into account:

1. *The historical context* of the author and the community for which he wrote. In our method, it is one part of a biblical scholar's job to bring to the attention of the team the relevant historical, social, political, physical circumstances of the context of any passage or verse. (These are not always known or uncontested.)
2. *The message of the book we are translating.* This principle relies on the 'hermeneutic cycle', that we understand the whole by the parts but also cannot understand the parts except with reference to the whole. Any one word or verse or episode in, say, the Gospel of Mark is best understood in relation to the whole work, the distinctive theological proclamation of the good news according to Mark. Again, it is one of the tasks of biblical scholars on the teams to keep this as a key frame of reference, and to build the capacity of the other team members to relate the parts to the whole. Again, there is scholarly evaluation of diverse opinion to be undertaken in this endeavour.

Theological traditions

Some biblical translations are also guided by a third source of implicit meaning, by a theological doctrine or a particular denominational tradition. This is yet more contentious than the above.

3. *A Christian theological tradition of interpretation.*

Christian tradition is plural and diverse. Our teams include members of a range of Christian churches (as well as members without religious affiliation). Perhaps when there are multiple versions of the Bible in BSL available, there will be room for denominationally-specific BSL versions. We want the first BSL Bible to be available to foster the faith of all sorts of Deaf believers, and to feed the understanding of Deaf readers who do not subscribe to a faith – because that is what other translations of the Bible offer to other readers. When we translate books of the Old Testament which are also books of the Hebrew Bible, Jewish scholarship and Jewish traditions of interpretation must also inform the translation process. Although no one denomination's doctrinal statement controls the BSL version or our understanding of the implicit meaning, our translators by no means ignore the theological interpretations which have derived from the original text. Sometimes it is particularly important to let a BSL reader of the Bible have access to the meaning which specific, believing readers have found in the text.

Here an example may help: in the gospels the phrase 'son of man' may or may not have originally been a sort of title, 'The Son of Man', in all its uses: however it has certainly become an important title for Jesus, as many people understand the text. The Deaf reader needs access to this idea in BSL, if our translation can manage it. The tension is between a meaning which is both accurate to the text and inclusive of this theological understanding – and (ideally) it should be rendered in a natural equivalence in BSL. This is extremely ambitious, and we shall not always be successful.

One of our points of reference for this aspect of the task is comparison with modern scholarly English versions of the Bible. These versions have often wrestled with this tension themselves, with scholarly integrity and various expressions of faith. If widely-accepted English versions have allowed a particular understanding to inform their translations (perhaps like making Son of Man into a title) the BSLV would not be idiosyncratic within British reception of the Bible if it did something similar. We want our translation to exist alongside and in relation to mainstream scholarly versions of the Bible in English. Users of the BSL Bible in the future will, we hope, be in dialogue with readers of English versions and will be studying alongside them. Our method includes a specific awareness of the decisions that other contemporary language versions (using both form-equivalent and function-equivalent methods) have made in translating our text. Our translators therefore consider important theological traditions that have influenced understandings of the text, and may reflect these in the translation, if they can do so: that is, if there is a natural equivalence in BSL which is both accurate to the text and inclusive of this theological understanding.

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References and some useful resources

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- and see some examples from this web discussion:*
<http://geneva.rutgers.edu/src/mine/tev.txt>