

The case for a mediating approach to Bible translation

Eric G Fields, SIL International¹

Abstract

According to Beekman and Callow, Bible translation styles range from the overly literal and literal to the idiomatic and unduly free (1974, 19-32). In a very broad way, these various categories help us to better understand the linguistic choices that are available when handling form and meaning in translation, but they don't really get at the complexities that are involved when a translator must deal with translation principles that often contrast and contradict each other. This paper and presentation will present various aspects of a mediating approach to Bible translation, showing how various translations define a mediating position, and explaining how the natural tension between form and meaning in translation can be used as a strength, rather than as a weakness, in the translation process.

Translating the Bible: The case for a mediating approach is the title of my recent MA thesis, published by Reformed Theological Seminary at Charlotte, North Carolina, July 2016. The paper and presentation at BT2017 will present a synopsis of the ideas found in the thesis, as well as present relevant examples that will be helpful to other translators interested in understanding more about a mediating approach to Bible translation.

Introduction

My interest in mediating approaches to Bible translation comes from an actual translation team experience where one party on the team was strongly for a more literal translation approach and another party was just as strongly for a dynamic or functional equivalence approach. A mediating approach to Bible translation is a compromise solution in that it governs the two ends of the translation styles continuum. However, it is not simply a compromise solution; it is also a choice and a strategy, which I believe offers help in understanding how to deal with some of the difficulties associated with the perceived weaknesses of these other two methods.

At BT2013, I shared about the history of our translation project in West Africa. Since then, I've completed an MA in Theological Studies through Reformed Theological Seminary, where I wrote a master's thesis called "The Case for a Mediating Approach to Bible Translation." In the thesis, I emphasized the fact that many evangelical Christians, especially in America, have a strong preference for literal Bible translations, believing them to be more "accurate" or correct than any of the mediating or dynamic translations we have available in English. Since I don't agree with that stance, I took up the challenge of writing about why a mediating approach to Bible translation is a better option.

What I would like to do in this paper is share with you some of the thoughts from that thesis. I believe there is a problem in Christianity today with understanding why a literal translation

¹ Eric Fields is an SIL New Testament translator with the "Makori translation project in Niger, West Africa. He and his wife Amy live in the Dallas area as a "remote assignment." His academic background includes a BA in Math (Long Beach State), an MA in Linguistics (GIAL), and an MA in Theological Studies (Reformed Theological Seminary). This article was presented at the Bible Translation Conference on October 16, 2017.

approach is not viable, and I believe there is an equal problem in Bible translation with us knowing how to articulate this well, but succinctly and briefly. That is, there is a problem with knowing what the problems and alternatives are, why we do what we do as translators, and how to communicate that to those who don't have this understanding. Notice that the trajectory of this presentation will be on why a mediating approach is superior to a literal or a modified-literal approach to Bible translation.

Hitting the “sweet spot”

In a technical article for *The Bible Translator* entitled “Formal Correspondence in Translation,” Eugene Nida asked the questions, “How far should a Bible translator go in adapting the message to the language and the culture of the receptors? Should one insist on following closely the wording of the original, and in a sense thus force the reader to adjust to the original? Or, should he try to employ the closest natural equivalent and bring the original to the reader?”²

These, of course, are the most basic questions facing translators: What style of translation should be used? Why is it best? Who gets to decide? In the article, Nida answers his own question right away, “There is no easy answer to this basic question, for there are so many factors involved.” Yet, because we are faced with such questions in translation (and partnership development and interaction with other believers), our saying “there are so many factors involved” seems like a non-answer, or at least the start to a longer answer that may not be very satisfying.

Later in this same article, Nida sets up a graph “model” for analyzing the formal differences between translations. On the vertical axis, he places the percentage amount of formal correspondence between source and target languages. A target language that had a perfect formal correspondence with the source language would score a perfect 100%, while all other target languages would score according to their hypothetical correspondence percentage. On the horizontal axis, he then ranks the languages of the world from the ones having the most formal correspondence with the biblical source languages to the ones having the least correspondence, theoretically giving “a rank order of languages, based on their formal characteristics.” At the extreme left would be the target languages that score a near perfect 100% correspondence, while all the languages less than that would be ordered right on down to those with relatively little to no formal correspondence at all.

I don't know that one could even conceivably assign such a percent correspondence, but hypothetically speaking, this graph would give a curve that would indicate each language's optimum point of formal correspondence. To go above this curve in translation for a given language would mean one is translating with too much formal correspondence for the language in question, while going below the curve at that point would mean too little formal correspondence is being used for said language. Of course, the trick for each translation project is knowing the translation principles well, and then applying them fairly and consistently during the translation process so that a certain “sweet spot” or relative formal correspondence is achieved, which is deemed “just right” for the target language in question. From this, note that this “sweet spot” for translation is a language-dependent phenomenon. That is, the capacity for a language to even have a literal translation that retains lots of lexical and grammatical formal

² Eugene Nida, “Formal Correspondence in Translation.” *The Bible Translator* 21, No. 3 (July 1970): 105-113.

correspondence is entirely dependent on how similar or how different a given language is to the biblical language one is translating from. If it is similar, one can conceivably translate successfully in a more wooden, literal style. But if it is not, one can't expect to produce a literal or a modified-literal translation with much success. All to say, the possibility of making a successful literal translation into a given language is not dependent on one's own preference for a literal translation style.

What I am leaving unsaid is that there are many translation principles which need to be discussed and analyzed to determine how they will be used and applied in a translation project. By responding to all the principles in a systematic way, one gains an understanding of how each principle will be perceived and treated during the work. These principles range from A to Z; and hypothetically speaking, if one made such a record of how they were going to respond to each of these, they would be in a better position to know exactly where this illusive "sweet spot" is, and what percent of formal correspondence one was shooting for. Nida sums up this section by saying, "[most translations] tend either to move too close to the source language, in which case they introduce far too much formal correspondence, or they may move too far from the source language and introduce too little formal correspondence."

In using the phrase "sweet spot," I am thinking of the place on a baseball bat that produces the most efficient hit on the ball. If a bat makes contact with the ball too close to the hands, the ball is hit weakly and without authority. If the contact is made toward the end of the bat, the ball is likewise shanked and without much punch. But if a bat hits the ball at just the right place, the "sweet spot," the ball will appear to jump off the bat. Of course, bat speed and swing angle also figure into the equation; but suffice it to say, hitting the ball with the "sweet spot" is an important part of properly sizing up the ball and hitting it a long way.

L. Ryken's "three principles"

Next, I'd like to talk about how those in the literal translation approach camp view the merits of a literal or modified-literal approach to translation. At BT2015, I heard a few paper presentations which referenced the wrong-headed ideas given about literal Bible translation. Since my objective today is to present a brief but concise statement about this, it will be helpful to understand better what those in the literal camp are saying is so important about their own translation approach.

The overarching principle for literal translation methods is that attention or "focus is given to the accuracy of words and word correspondence between source and target language texts. Their focus is on words, and words are critical in the development of a theological understanding of Scripture." In *Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach*,³ L. Ryken gives three reasons why he believes an essentially literal approach has merit, all of which emphasize what is retained by this focus on words: 1) fullness of language, 2) transparency of the original language, and 3) the literary qualities of the Bible. We will look at each of these in turn.

³ Leland Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 119-149.

First, fullness of language. Ryken's first point is that a fullness of language can be achieved when the focus in translation remains on the individual words. On the flip side, his worry is that anything less than this will result in a reduction of some kind. Unfortunately, this point assumes that the target language in question has the necessary vocabulary to accommodate the perfect word-for-word translation he is envisioning. In many non-English languages throughout the world, idiomatic or paraphrastic renderings of key terms can be more helpful to the reader precisely because there isn't a term that adequately captures the meaning of the original language word; or worse yet, there is a term, but because of connotation, it communicates wrong meaning.

Note that this is a word-level phenomenon in translation, where it is assumed that one word in the source language can be replaced by one word in the target language with consistency and regularity. This is a simplistic, black-and-white caricature of the nature of language that is not always possible or desirable to maintain. Violations of polysemy and proper concordance will ensue if languages are not allowed to function according to their own lexicon and grammar rules.

Second, transparency of the original language. Ryken's second point is that a transparency of the original languages is retained when the focus in translation remains on the individual words. His concern here is that translations, by their very nature, should reflect what the original author had in mind. There is no room for introducing one's own ideas into the text, either to clarify what the author was trying to say, or to make the text easier to understand. His idea of transparency is that, by keeping an eye on what the original text says, an essentially literal translation will use vocabulary and syntax that most closely corresponds to the original text. This, then, provides the clearest "window" through which a reader can see what the original authors have written.

Note that this is not just a word level, but a phrase-level phenomenon in translation, where it is assumed that one complete phrase in the source language can be replaced as a unit by one phrase in the target language, content and connecting bits together, also with consistency and regularity. But this, too, is a simplistic, black-and-white caricature of the nature of language that is not always possible or desirable to maintain across languages. The nature of syntax and grammar across languages in translation is that it is necessary to make many, many adjustments of connecting words, linkage words, case markers, etc. in order to say the same things. It is just not possible to maintain a wooden syntax or grammar without doing great damage to the target language.

Ryken later notes that in keeping the transparency of the original language in translation, one is also keeping the full exegetical potential of the Bible. I believe this thought allows for simple comparison of things between languages like prepositions, connector words, or other small language bits. This kind of translation allows the reader to make exegetical judgments in the target language that match the exegetical determinations that are made in the original or source language. However, this, too, is illogical. The necessary syntax and grammatical adjustments made in the target language are done for the sake of having good syntax and grammar in that language. Any match of syntax and grammar between source and target languages is fortuitous, not necessarily indicative of the success or failure of the translator. This kind of thinking is what handcuffs translators to the source language forms and keeps them from making the best language decisions possible at any given point for the in which language they are working.

Third, literary qualities. Ryken's third point is that the literary qualities of the Bible are preserved when the focus remains on the individual words. In his book, Ryken digresses on this point to show that metaphors can't be translated dynamically because this waters down the

literary qualities of Scripture. There is much written about the difficulties with translating metaphors in Bible translation, and I can't even begin to cover that topic here. But I would say that Ryken's argument seems to appeal to keeping "Scripture sounding like Scripture," with a high regard for a robust vocabulary, a high register, and biblical word-order choices.

I will comment on his appeal to vocabulary and register first. One of the things that makes "Scripture sound like Scripture," in my opinion, is the fact that the King James Version was originally published in 1611. Because the vocabulary is over 400 years old, and from a different continent no less, it has a stylishness about it that can't be reproduced when one wants to translate using contemporary English. It is a choice of his to prefer the vocabulary of the KJV, but it isn't fair to say that the KJV's translation has done a better job in its choice of vocabulary because of this. In 1895, A. Deissmann found that the Greek of the NT was *koiné*, or the common language of the time. If a translator today wants to use the best vocabulary in translation, he or she would do well to consider using the common language of the people today, rather than opting for language that is over 400 years old.

Next, I will comment on word-order choices. Some people like the KJV because it "sounds biblical," when it is actually following the Greek word order in order to do this. However, according to the work of Stephen Levinsohn, Greek word order is VSO while English is SVO. This means that English is actually incorrectly indicating topicality, as well as skewing ideas of emphasis or focus when following the Greek word order in a wooden way. Likewise, translators of other literal and modified-literal translations who follow the Greek word order have not understood the importance of discourse analysis, information flow, and Longacre's "vertical revolution" in linguistics. It may "sound more biblical" to them, but it is not communicating what the original authors were communicating in their choices for word order in the original languages.

I believe Ryken has appealed to some of the widely held, popular ideas about the importance of essentially literal translation. However, these ideas do not show a very good understanding of the nature of language in general, or a very good understanding of the complex process of Bible translation across diverse languages specifically. At the word level, language translation doesn't work like that. There is no guarantee that single words can be found for doing single word substitutions as he advocates, and basing an entire translation strategy on this is simplistic and naïve, especially translation into exotic languages of the world. At the phrase and clause level, language translation also doesn't work like that. Maintaining similar syntax and grammar across languages so one can see the original language through the "window" of the translation just won't work. It assumes the target language won't be skewed, distorted, or destroyed in the process, another assumption that is just plain wrong. And at the literary level, one must leave the idea of "sounding more biblical" to the side, if what is really given in translation is archaic vocabulary and a wrong sense of topicality and focus.

The importance of words...

This is one of the phrases often heard with respect to the superiority of an "essentially literal" approach to Bible translation. Somehow, words matter; and if you care about words, and God certainly cares about words, then you and I should care about them too, to the extent that we choose them carefully, one at a time, to match consistently and exactly the words in the original

languages. However, as shown above, this is a naïve view of the nature of language. Why? Because one language's words and their semantic range will not match another language's words and their semantic range of meanings. In other words, their lexicons will differ greatly, and so polysemy (words having multiple senses) and concordance (matching word senses consistently) will not work as well as hoped for or expected.

But debunking this focus on words really doesn't go far enough. One of my favorite books at GIAL was John Taylor's *Linguistic Categorization: Prototypes in Linguistic Theory*. In it, the author explains the importance of understanding polysemy from a prototype perspective for the sake of how we categorize. The book became interesting to me when I began to see that we aren't just talking about content words or theologically important key terms. Rather, all words, including connector words, prepositions, negation markers, locative markers, topic and focus markers, etc., display this ability to be polysemous, having a prototype structure to them, implying they all have central, primary meanings along with non-central, secondary senses, ad infinitum. What this means is that it is not just the content or theologically significant words that need to be looked at carefully in translation. It's all the in-between connector words, too, that need to be properly understood and translated into their proper place. The number of adjustments that need to be made in translation due to a lack of having a one-to-one correspondence template is legion.⁴

To repeat, words are important in translation. And because each language has its own lexicon and grammar, it is extremely important to allow each language in the translation process to be fully studied and understood so that correct choices can be made with respect to how the words will function. But one language cannot be a "window" to another language, as if its own language qualities can be suspended for a time without some loss or distortion. The more one language is bent and shaped to perform like one of the biblical languages, the less it will function like itself and be understood by the modern-day speakers of that language. This is the nature of language, and it is being violated when emphasis is given to the source language over the target language. There are always at least two languages to be fully considered in the process of Bible translation.

Consider this numerical example of the importance of words in translation. In his article, *Fifteen myths about Bible translation*,⁵ Daniel Wallace shows that the total number of words in the Greek New Testament, depending on the version chosen, is between 138,000 and 140,000 words. The New Living Translation and Today's English Version, both dynamic translations, have 186,596 and 192,784 total words respectively in their New Testament sections. One would expect this higher total since dynamic translations say things in other ways that tend to increase the word count total. However, the English Standard Version has only slightly fewer at 175,599 words, which isn't even close to the Greek's 140,000 total word count. The truth is, all 16 English translation versions that Wallace lists have more than 173,000 words. Why the discrepancy between Greek and English version word counts? Because English is a very different language from the Greek; it doesn't have the capacity to say the same things using the same number of words as Greek. It just doesn't. And this is not because I am for or against literal

⁴ John Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization: Prototypes in Linguistic Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵ Daniel Wallace, "Fifteen Myths about Bible Translation," <https://danielbwallace.com/2012/10/08/fifteen-myths-about-bible-translation> (accessed April 1, 2016).

translations. The truth is, there is no practical word-for-word or “essentially literal” translation approach, at least not for English. Many adjustments must be made in the translation of Greek to English, as the numbers show; and it is better to assume that many adjustments will be made, rather than to assume that an essentially literal translation is possible and really happening.

A mediating approach to Bible translation

A mediating approach to Bible translation, as the name implies, mediates between literal and dynamic approaches to the translation process. Consider the concepts of *accuracy*, *clarity*, and *naturalness*. A literal translation approach focuses more on the biblical languages as a guide, thus causing accuracy to be the truest measure of success in translation and forcing the target language to make choices that reflect accuracy on a word-for-word basis. In other words, the necessity of having a high level of accuracy will necessarily adversely affect clarity and naturalness.

On the other hand, a dynamic approach focuses more on the target language as a guide, thus causing clarity and naturalness to be the truest measures of success in the translation process. Questions that surround audience impact and understanding will be more important than literal accuracy. In other words, the necessity of having a clear and natural translation will necessarily affect accuracy in the translation process.

A mediating approach to translation, though, will try to use the concepts of accuracy, clarity, and naturalness in a three-way tension, not in strict opposition. If accuracy can't be achieved using a literal word-for-word approach, then a more dynamic solution can be used. Clarity and naturalness can be used as a guide, then, for testing when a literal approach is effective or not. In a mediating translation approach, success isn't measured by whether a literal or a dynamic rendering is most often used or not. Rather, success is measured by keeping the pillars of accuracy, clarity, and naturalness in tension, so that the best translation is produced, using the target language in ways that it is best used and understood.

Two examples of mediating approaches to Bible translation are the New International Version (NIV) and the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), also known as the Holman Bible. However, their use of the mediating approach is a little bit different. The NIV is often called a “thought-for-thought” translation, meaning they didn't focus on a word-for-word accuracy, but rather a broader, more flexible approach that allowed for clarity and naturalness to trump accuracy when it seemed appropriate and necessary. The NIV seems to want to find a niche between translations that are too literal, on the one hand, and too dynamic, on the other.

In contrast to this, the CSB uses what they call “an optimal” approach to translation. They claim to use a more literal or modified-literal approach when it relates to the translation of theological key terms, but then they use a more dynamic approach when it relates to less theologically rich situations. In doing so, they focus on readability, producing a smooth sounding translation overall, but then using the theologically rich terms that one comes to expect with the Bible in those instances where it is deemed important. Their approach also mediates between accuracy, clarity, and naturalness; but they are charting out, in advance, when the tensions will lean toward accuracy and when they will lean toward naturalness and clarity.

In conclusion

When I set out to write a seminary thesis on Bible translation, my main concern or desire was with articulating well why an essentially literal translation approach is not the best choice for Bible translation. In response, I think I can confidently say the following about a mediating approach: Bible translation necessarily involves two or more languages. Proper attention should be given to the source or original biblical languages so that the meaning of the source text can be fully comprehended. This includes both an understanding of the source language lexicon, grammar, and discourse structure in general, and the text under consideration specifically. Along with this, equal attention should be given to the target language so that the meaning of the text can be fully transmitted. This attention includes an understanding of the target language lexicon, grammar, and discourse structure, fully noting the conventions of and exceptions to how things are said. When undue emphasis is given to either the source or target languages, a distortion of some kind will necessarily enter the translation, whether intentional or not. The nature of language is such that each language in the translation process should be fully considered so that the best choices can be made to arrive at the most accurate, clear, and natural translation possible in the target language.

As noted above, finding this place where accuracy, clarity, and naturalness come together in translation can be called hitting the “sweet spot.” The sweet spot is not defined by how literal or dynamic a translation is. This would be pitting accuracy against clarity and naturalness in an endless struggle for dominance. Rather, the sweet spot is language specific, and it is determined by making the best decisions possible at each given instance in the translation process. This places accuracy and the source language in tension with clarity, naturalness, and the target language. If one follows the translation strategy of the CSB, then this tension will tend toward accuracy or clarity and naturalness, depending on the specific translation situation in question. However, the constant here in a mediating translation approach is this: Truth in translation isn’t an “either-or” proposition, sacrificing clarity and naturalness for the sake of accuracy, or vice-versa. Rather, it is a “both-and” or “win-win” proposition. The goal is to find the best solutions which maintain the tensions of accuracy, clarity, and naturalness to the highest degree throughout.

The trajectory of this paper has been to show that a mediating approach to Bible translation is a better option than a literal approach. A literal translation errs in that it favors accuracy more than Nida’s optimal formal correspondence calls for or allows. Because of this, a literal approach does not allow the target language to speak for itself, thus necessarily causing a distortion of some kind in the target translation. On the other hand, a mediating approach does allow each language in the translation process to speak fully for itself, source and target language alike. In this way, a mediating translation is able to communicate God’s Word accurately and in a clear and natural way in the target language. And so, because the true nature of language is not violated, a mediating approach is a better option than a literal approach in Bible translation.

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