

# A False Claim of Translation Quality: Deliberately Omitting Polite Morphology

Peter Unseth, Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics Professor

Abstract: Many languages have specific linguistic forms that show politeness, respect, and honor. Many Bible translators have not used these, while some have even claimed it is better not to use them in translations. This article argues that it is best to use them unless there is a strong reason not to use them. Then it gives a number of guidelines and warnings about using polite forms in Bible translation.

## 1. The problem: deliberately not using RL polite forms

Many languages and cultures use different pronouns or grammatical forms to indicate different levels of politeness. People who speak these languages regularly use their grammar to reflect the relative social positions between themselves and their listeners. They generally expect written conversations to reflect these norms. Translating Scripture into languages that have these grammatical categories requires careful thinking.

Generally, the Biblical languages did not use special pronouns or verb forms to show respect and politeness.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it has been claimed by some that to employ honorific forms in a translation requires translators to make subjective decisions about when to use them. Therefore, it is argued that when we translate Scripture we should not use special forms that mark politeness. This claim has explicitly been used to argue against using polite forms in translating Scripture into French, arguing that it requires translators to make “subjective” decisions (Péter-Contesse 1991, sections 5.2.1.2 and 6). A similar line of thinking led Oswald Allis to ask “Is the translator to exegete each passage and decide dogmatically which of these pronouns is to be used in a given case?” (Thackway 1993).

I reject the premise that because the SL (source language) does not use a morphological method of marking levels of politeness we should not do so in translating into other languages. My goal in this paper is to remind translators to make a serious effort to understand and carefully decide how to appropriately use the customary RL (receptor language) methods for marking politeness in translating Scripture. This does not mean French, or any other language with morphological politeness distinctions, *must* use these forms in Scripture translation. But I do reject the argument that using them should be avoided because using them requires translators to make decisions.

## 2. Introduction to the terminology used

In discussing pronominal systems that distinguish social levels, writers have described them as being based on degrees of respect, social rank, power, intimacy, formality, etc. Brown and Gilman, in their seminal article from 1960, used the terms “power and solidarity” to

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<sup>1</sup>A 3<sup>rd</sup> person reference was sometimes used to show politeness for the addressee in Hebrew, as when Esther invites the king personally, saying, “If it pleases the king,” replied Esther, “let the king... come today to a banquet I have prepared for him” (Est. 5:4 ). This extended use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person to show politeness has too often been overlooked in this matter. It should rightfully be considered a marker for politeness, a point to be considered when translating. For example, translating this literally into English can lead to confusion as to whether the addressee is the person referred to with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person form or somebody else.

characterize such distinctions, introducing the abbreviations **T** for low and **V** for high. These abbreviations, derived from Latin *tu* and *vos*, are now widely used to refer to two levels of pronouns where the difference is based on social differences.

In some languages, the same sort of social distinctions are also marked on 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person. This paper will only discuss the marking of power and solidarity on 2<sup>nd</sup> person forms. The principles illustrated here in studying 2<sup>nd</sup> person forms can be readily transferred to 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person forms.

Though Brown and Gilman used the terms “power and solidarity”, the precise social values indicated by using two levels of morphology will vary from language to language. People will use a variety of terms in discussing these, including “polite”, “honorific”, “deferential”, “formal”, “respectful”. In Korean, Hwang (1990) has even claimed a difference between “politeness” and “deference”. To simplify grammar in discussing the power and solidarity distinctions across languages, this article simply refers to “polite” or **T/V** forms to cover a wide variety of social relationships. The details of analysis and application will differ by language, but the general principles given here will be relevant.

Also, a number of languages distinguish more than two levels of power and solidarity. The principles illustrated with two levels of pronouns are equally applicable to languages that distinguish additional levels, where their proper application is likely to be even more imperative.

### 3. SL linguistic categories that are not indicated in the RL

Some claim that levels of politeness should not be morphologically marked in a translation since the SL does not mark this distinction; they believe that to morphologically mark such a distinction in the RL would be undue interpretation, rather than translation (Péter-Contesse 1991). However, this argument is not heard in relation to other linguistic categories. For example, French translators have not refrained from making a choice between the grammatical categories of *imparfait* and *passé simple*, though this distinction is not marked in the SL.

I worked in a translation project among the Majangir people of Ethiopia, whose language marks three different past tenses and two future tenses. Would anybody argue that the Majangir Scripture translation must use only one past tense and one future tense because the SL did not distinguish multiple past and future tenses? Or would anybody argue that a language that marks the inclusive/exclusive distinction on 1<sup>st</sup> person plural should not mark this distinction in translating Scripture simply because it is not distinguished in the SL? I hope not. In both of these cases, most everyone agrees that not using these RL grammatical categories in their natural patterns would distort the message as it is translated.

If a RL marks **T/V** distinctions, we must assume that the natural grammar of the RL requires that we employ these **T/V** distinctions. To make no choice between **T** and **V** forms is already making a choice. That is, many readers of the translation will not realize that the translators *chose* to not make a distinction in honorifics by always using a single default form. These readers will approach the text with the same expectations that they have for a natural-language text, which include the existence of a culturally and linguistically-prescribed pattern of honorific usage based on the social context of a given utterance.

It is my contention that those who choose not to use the RL’s usual methods of marking differences in politeness levels are not following the expected patterns of the RL culture and grammar. By marking only one level of politeness morphologically, they are likely distorting the

meaning of the original text by conveying that the Biblical characters spoke to each other all on one social level.

#### 4. Different degrees of politeness

Among languages that use morphology to distinguish different levels of politeness, the most common pattern is two levels, a neutral and a higher one.<sup>2</sup> Some other languages have three or more. The complexity of Thai pronouns gives over a dozen choices, distinguishing different factors.

In languages where there are more levels of morphologically indicated politeness, translators are probably less reluctant to use these morphologically marked distinctions, knowing that using them is natural, even imperative. However, they must still work to use them correctly.

#### 5. Different methods of marking politeness

There are a number of ways of marking politeness linguistically. The most obvious is the use of distinct pronouns, such as in Romance languages, German, and Amharic. In a number of languages, 3<sup>rd</sup> person or plural pronouns are used for 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular as a sign of increased politeness. Many languages also use verb affixes or possessive suffixes that indicate a level of politeness to the addressee.<sup>3</sup>

Different levels of politeness can also be shown by the names and/or titles used in addressing a person, such as “Prof. Smith” (as opposed to simply “Pat”), “Madame/Sir”, “Your Excellency”, etc. Another way to mark a level of politeness is by use of special vocabulary, some languages having very clearly delineated categories of vocabulary for higher and lower relationships, such as Javanese (Gonda 1948), Thai and Burmese (Shae 2002:202). Certain kin terms are used in some languages as polite terms of address, such as *babushka* ‘grandmother’ in Russian.

These are some of the most obvious ways of marking differences in politeness linguistically, though there are doubtless other, often less explicit, ways. These methods of indicating differences of power and solidarity are not mutually exclusive; a language can use more than one of them.

Also, the context will often indicate when politeness is being shown. This is especially clear if a person bows down (1 Sam. 25:23,24, Lk. 17:16), uses titles of politeness such as “lord” (2 Sam 9:11) or “king” (Acts 26:2), or when an utterance is labeled as insulting or cursing (2 Sam. 16:7, Lk. 23:39,40). Also, sometimes the authority of the speaker in relation to the hearer is clarified by the use of a verb such as “beg” or “command” (Voinov 2002:211), the former suggesting that the speaker shows a higher degree of politeness.

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<sup>2</sup>This is, of course, a broad generalization. Languages certainly allow speakers to mark finer increments of politeness within these two levels, but I refer here to morphological categories, where two different sets of morphemes are the most common pattern.

<sup>3</sup>Certainly many languages also mark politeness distinctions on 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person, but the principles given here on 2<sup>nd</sup> person can be applied easily to these other languages for marking politeness on 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person.

## 6. Survey of what has been done in some languages

The following survey of languages is not done with a representative sample of languages around the world. It merely illustrates some of what has been done.

It is striking that a number of languages whose grammars regularly mark a **T/V** distinction have Bible translations that have not utilized it, over a period of centuries, including German, French, Amharic, Oromo, Spanish, and Russian. In all of these cases, the translations use the **T** form exclusively, until very recent translations. (Not surprisingly, I found no translation that uses only **V** forms, since the **V** form is inherently more marked, the non-default.) It is not clear what factors have guided these choices, but it seems that it is not a coincidence, though very puzzling, that multiple languages with **T/V** distinctions have made this same choice of using only one level of politeness.

Earlier French translations did not use **V** forms. The French translation *Français Courant* used some **V** forms in the 1982 1<sup>st</sup> edition, but these were removed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, with the explanation that they did not improve the translation, but rather called for “subjective” decisions by translators (Péter-Contesse 1991: section 6). For the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, the translation committee voted to cease using the polite forms<sup>4</sup> (Margot and Péter-Contesse 1992:16).<sup>5</sup>

For centuries, Spanish Bibles used only **T** forms. Ross (1991, 1993) has shown how the Spanish *Versión Popular* has broken from the tradition of Spanish Bible translation by using **V** *usted* forms, not just the **T** *tu* forms. He points out that though it is done fairly consistently in Acts and the Old Testament, it is used only in the parables in the Gospels. It is a compromise but at least a step toward using the full normal range of the language in marking social relations. The New Testaments of the *Nueva Versión Internacional* and *La Biblia para Todos: Traducción en el Lenguaje Actual* have apparently followed the same basic pattern.

In Ethiopia, many languages mark a polite distinction in 2<sup>nd</sup> person. For Amharic, with over 150 years of Bible translation history, all six versions examined use only the **T** forms.<sup>6</sup> Likewise in the Oromo and Wolaitta Bibles, the **V** forms have not been used, only the **T**. In the Bench-Gimira New Testament, polite **V** forms are used in only a few passages, including in Acts 26:2. In the Aari New Testament, only one verse has a **V** form.

The Thai language has a very complex set of pronoun options for 2<sup>nd</sup> person (also for 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person) and translations have used different levels, no translation using only one level of politeness in address. As an example of sensitive translation, Seely explained that in one translation, as Jesus was being examined, the high priest used a pronoun of address that is used by superiors to inferiors (Mt. 26:63) but Pilate used a more neutral term (27:11) (1957:57). In another Thai translation, everybody addresses Jesus at the same level of politeness.

Wendland reported that the Chewa and Tonga translation teams (Zambia) deliberately used pronouns indicating different levels of politeness (1985:60-73). He gave examples of how attitudes between speakers (including changing attitudes) are shown by the change in the selection of pronouns of address in the interaction between Isaac and Abimelech, Rebecca and Abraham’s servant, and Jacob and Laban.

Rabinal Achi (Guatemala) has morphemes that mark two levels of politeness. The translation team used both of them to distinguish the levels of politeness that speakers show.

<sup>4</sup>“On renonce effectivement à l’emploi du vous <<politesse>>.”

<sup>5</sup>Ellingworth (2002:150) points out that at least two uses of *vu* survived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Mt. 27:64 and Acts 24:2.

<sup>6</sup>In the 2005 UBS translation, there are a very few sporadic uses of the formal forms in addressing kings, such as in Ezra chapters 4 and 5 and Esther 7:3. But even within this translation, the use of polite forms is extremely limited.

Chhetri (2009) examines how Nepali Bible translators have translated 2<sup>nd</sup> person forms in a variety of contexts. He shows readers an examination of a wide-ranging study of social situations, such as what levels of politeness Jesus and his parents showed to each other when they found him in the temple.

On a larger scale, Cho (2009) provides a book-length, detailed analysis of how the complex system of Korean polite forms have been used in a variety of contexts by various Korean Bible translators. She also presents a flowchart model for thinking through the steps of translating honorific pronouns.

## 7. Problems resulting from inconsistent translation of **T/V** forms

Here is only a brief discussion of some of the kinds of problems that can result from translating **T/V** forms inconsistently, either inconsistent with the natural ways of the language community or inconsistent within the text.

When Scripture is translated in ways that are inconsistent with the norms of the language community, this can create the impression that Biblical characters are acting strangely, rudely. For example, it can make people wonder why Jesus is so impolite to leaders, or why people address kings so casually, e.g. “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you (**T**)” (Acts 26:2). Also, it masks how some people’s attitudes towards Jesus changed over time.

Translating without following a language’s norms for marking **T/V** distinction can also create dissonance within a passage. For example, Luke addresses Theophilus (Lk. 1:3) with a title of politeness: “your Excellency” (NEB), “Honorable Theophilus” (CEV), “most noble Theophilus” (God’s Word). But in languages where translators have chosen to omit all **V** forms, this creates a clash of the informal pronouns together with a formal title: “to write an orderly account for you (**T**), most excellent Theophilus”.

In fairness to Péter-Contesse, he was aware of such potential awkwardness, but says that it can be handled if “the translators take care to put a certain distance (several words) between the vocative title and the pronoun” (Margot and Péter-Contesse 1992).

## 8. Mismatch in ways of marking politeness between SL and RL

Earlier, I mentioned that Hebrew sometimes used 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular as a polite form for 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular, e.g. “Why should the king repay me with such a reward?” (2 Sam 19:36). Translators working in languages that use specific linguistic forms to mark politeness will need to consider using their language’s normal **V** forms instead of automatically using the 3<sup>rd</sup> singular for such passages. That is, even though the Hebrew uses 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular forms to show politeness in some contexts, other languages may use polite 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns or 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural forms. The danger is in woodenly translating the Hebrew 3<sup>rd</sup> singular forms with RL 3<sup>rd</sup> singular forms.

## 9. Different criteria for when to use polite forms

It is common to speak of **T** and **V** forms, marking two levels of power and solidarity. The social difference marked by these forms between speakers is often determined by age, rank, relationship, wealth, gender, setting, etc. However, the difference between these two levels varies greatly between languages. For example, in Kyrgyz, if the addressee is as little as two years older

than the speaker, it is appropriate to use the **V** form. In other languages, an age-based difference calling for use of the **V** form may be used when the addressee is a generation older, so that speakers use **V** forms when addressing people who are at least of the age of their parents.

Each translation team will need to look carefully at the rules of their own culture and also at the context of each Biblical passage to determine which level of politeness to show and which linguistic form would best show that level of politeness. For example, what are the cultural norms when speaking to strangers, teachers, rulers of various levels, husbands to wives, wives to husbands, children to parents, people requesting information, requesting a favor, etc.? Do these vary by dialect?

In some languages, an unknown woman (such as the Samaritan woman in John 4) would be addressed with a **T** form (Amharic), but in other languages with a **V** form (Rabinal Achi).

In some societies, children address their parents with the **T** form, e.g. German; but in other languages they address parents with the **V** form, e.g. Rabinal Achi and some dialects of Tuvin (Voinov 2002). In other cases, the use of the **V** form is dependent on the status of the child. For example, among the Xavante of Brazil, sons begin to use the **V** forms with their parents when their ears are pierced at an initiation rite and daughters begin to use these forms after the birth of their first child.

In some languages, God is addressed with the **T** form (French, Amharic, German), in others with a higher form (Burmese), and in some there are two different patterns of use among different religious groups. For example, in some Spanish speaking areas, Catholics use the **V** form and Protestants use the **T** form; in some parts of Brazil the opposite is true.

All of these uses of **T/V** forms are calculated on the basis of the relationship and personal attributes of the speaker and addressee, as categorized by a specific culture. Therefore, translators should not automatically follow the specific decisions made by translators in other languages.

The use of polite forms can also be dependent on the setting of the speech event. Generally, the more formal the event, the more likely the speaker is to use polite forms. Formality may be distinguished by type of event, topic, or the presence of others. For example, the narration of Paul's trial before Agrippa shows that it is a very formal occasion, "Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city" (Acts 25:23). Festus then made an introductory speech (25:24-27). When Paul finally begins to speak, addressing himself to King Agrippa, it is clear that this is a very formal setting in every way and in most (all?) languages Paul would be expected to use formal forms as he begins "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you" (Acts 26:2).

Contrast this with Acts 12:13-15, where the setting is the opposite of formal. The servant girl Rhoda has interrupted a prayer meeting with the fantastic news that Peter is at the door. The people tell her "You're out of your mind." In this passage, a less formal form addressed to her would be likely.

## 10. Ironic or pretended uses of levels of politeness

It is also important to realize that levels of politeness can be used insincerely and also ironically and insultingly. When a group of Jewish leaders sent spies to ask Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar, they preface their question with a flattering introduction "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God

in accordance with the truth” (Lk. 20:21). In such a setting, we could expect them to use a higher level of politeness than when the leaders had demanded of him earlier in the chapter, “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things... Who gave you this authority?” (Lk. 20:2). When they use this higher level of politeness in 20:21, they are using it insincerely.

There are also passages where it seems that people are deliberately mocking by addressing someone with a higher form than they actually consider appropriate. A good example of this is when the soldiers mock Jesus, “They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.” (Matt. 27:28-31). It is clear from their physical actions and from Matthew’s use of “mocked” twice that the soldiers do not sincerely mean it when they address him as “king”. Rather, though they address him as king, they do so insincerely. In such a case, translators in some languages may choose to use **V** forms ironically. In fact, the only use of a **V** form in the Aari NT of Ethiopia was just such a case, with Roman soldiers mocking Jesus, “Hail, king of the Jews!”

The same sort of situation is also found in Matt 26:67,68, “They spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?’” Their actions show that even though they address him as the Christ, these soldiers clearly do not truly believe he is the Messiah, nor do they believe that he is indeed able to prophesy and tell them which soldier had struck him. They may address him with a high title, but they are clearly mocking him in so doing. (Note, this passage contains more explicit indicators about the mocking manner of speech than the parallel passage in Mk. 14:65, so it is an important indication of what level of politeness to use in the Mark passage.)

#### 11. What level of politeness should be used to address Jesus?

Many translation teams in languages with polite forms have struggled with the question of how people should address Jesus. They may feel divided between the desire to convey the point of view of the speakers and the desire to affirm that Jesus is divine. In some languages, the level of politeness used to address Jesus has been decided by the translators’ fuller understanding of who Jesus is and their desire to show the divinity of Jesus (Shae 2002, Ellingworth 2002:153). This has most often been a difficult matter in language communities where Christianity is a marginal religion, in areas that are largely dominated by other religions than Christianity. I cannot hope to settle this issue, but as a beginning of a general rule, I suggest that Jesus be addressed by different characters in ways that reflect speakers’ understanding (at the time) of who Jesus was. For example, some Jewish leaders said to Jesus, “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?” (John 8:48). This shows a very low level of politeness, but other people addressed him with more politeness, confirmed by their use of the title “Lord” (John 11:34, Matt. 15:27), even bowing at his feet (John 11:32).

Not only will different characters address Jesus differently, even the same characters will address him differently in different passages. For example, in Luke 20, at the beginning and the end of the chapter, a group of Jewish leaders address him with very different levels of politeness (20:2 and 20:21).

Also, characters grew in their understanding of who Jesus was. For example, when the Samaritan woman first meets Jesus at the well, she sees him as a mere man. During their

conversation with him, she realizes he is more than that, first thinking he is a prophet, then growing in her understanding to the point that she asks if he can indeed be the Messiah (Shae 2002:207). By changing her usage of T/V forms during the story, the translator can help the reader/hearer to understand her growing understanding of Jesus' identity.

In a translation project where there is not yet an established body of believers to make an informed decision about which form to use in addressing God, the question is more important, and more difficult. The decision cannot be made without taking into consideration the language patterns of the RL culture.

## 12. Limits on the use of special sets of pronouns

Though a language makes morphological distinctions based on power and solidarity, translators should not automatically use them, or at least not use them everywhere. For example, Péter-Contesse (1991) claims that they should not be used in French (though his arguments are not convincing to all). There are other cases where the evidence against using them is clearer.

The Xavante of Brazil mark degrees of power/solidarity by distinct sets of pronouns and the use of 3<sup>rd</sup> person for 2<sup>nd</sup> person. When an outside translation advisor suggested using these in translating Scripture, "the Xavante rejected it. Typically they would laugh and say something like, 'It sounds cute, but they are not Xavante. Only we Xavante talk like that.' In other words, the forms are so *tightly linked* [emphasis in original] to their culture and kinship system, that they refused to make the leap to applying to another cultural group 2000 years ago. It illustrates how closely they link this politeness system with their own specific cultural context" (Harrison n.d.). This is a sobering reminder that even though a language uses morphological means to distinguish degrees of solidarity/power, these should not rigidly and automatically be used in translating Scripture.

Shae came from a language community in Burma that did not morphologically mark T/V distinctions, and he grew up reading the New Testament in that language. When he moved into an urban setting, he was quite struck (negatively) by the way in which the Burmese Bible marked Jesus as higher and less intimate (2002). Though he objects to this morphological practice, Burmese-speaking Christians feel a strong attachment to the terms in established use. Though I cannot make any evaluation about how Jesus should address the people and be addressed in Burmese, it is clear that the emotional, as well as theological, impact of such morphological choices is very strong.

## 13. Suggestions for translation projects in languages that have morphological elements marking power/solidarity distinctions

My first suggestion is a matter of general approach: if a language marks T/V distinctions, translators should use them in Scripture unless there is a compelling reason not to use them, such as among the Xavante. Secondly, these choices should not be made by a small circle of leaders in isolation. Such choices need to be made in consultation with informed Christians and others from the language community, with representatives from as many church groupings as possible.

As a practical step, translators should prepare a list of the morphemes and then outline the general rules for using them to mark various degrees of politeness. After the preparation of this guide, they should think about how various interpersonal relationships should be indicated in translation, then write down their decisions and reasoning, an idea from Voinov (2002) and Shae



(2002). A chart like Table 1 will help translators to consciously be aware of their grammar's patterns. Clearly, these decisions can be reconsidered and adjusted later, but it gives translators a guide for consistency. Ross pointed to the need for consistency, citing disappointing examples from one translation of the inconsistent ways two different women addressed Elisha (1993:229).

However, translators should not make rigid consistency their only and ultimate guide. For example, when the Samaritan woman first meets Jesus at the well, she sees him as a mere man. During her conversation with him, she realizes he is more than that.

Table 1 is a small sample of what part of such a chart might look like. Such a guide can save translators having to rethink the rules in each passage and will also lead toward consistency in the final translation.

Table 1. Chart for keeping track of use of **T/V** forms in a translation

	<b>T</b> form	<b>V</b> form	form in reply	Notes
Jesus to individual disciples				
Disciples to Jesus				
Disciples to Jesus (post-resurrection)				
Pharisees (hostile) to Jesus				
Pharisees (polite) to Jesus				
Paul to an official				
Official to Paul				
Pharaoh to Moses				
Moses to Pharaoh				
etc.				

14. Special reminder for translation projects where translators are guided by a translation in a language that has a **T/V** distinction

In some translation projects, translators frequently consult and rely heavily on a Bible in a language that morphologically marks distinctions of solidarity/power, e.g. French, Russian, Amharic, or Thai. This creates at least two possible problems.

First, the text they are reading may not have used the **T/V** marking distinctions in the ways that they are actually used in the society that speaks the language. Therefore, translators who understand the text through the cultural grid of the language and culture of the text they are reading may misunderstand the social relations in the Biblical text itself.

A friend told me of a group in inner Asia who spoke a language in which the lowest form of politeness was also the level used for intimacy. Therefore, when they prayed or translated people talking to God, they used the lowest form. When they went to the neighboring group and told them about Jesus, they used the neighbor language's low forms in the same way as they did

in their own language. However, the neighboring group understood them not as being intimate, but as insulting God by using the low form instead of the high form.

Secondly, the target language and the model translation will have different rules for when to use the different levels of power/solidarity. Therefore, the rules of the language of their source text may mislead the translators in their choices in the RL. For example, when two people from the Rabinal Achi community speak to each other in their own language, they apply the polite forms differently than when the same people speak to each other in Spanish. As another example, when Jesus addresses his mother, the rules of French and Amharic call for the use of the **T** form, but the rules of Tuvin (in some dialects) call for the **V** form when addressing one's mother. It may very well be that people translating from such a source text would be excessively influenced by the **T/V** choices of their source. Therefore, translators must be careful to use **T/V** forms consistently with the norms of the receptor culture.

A third problem that may arise in following a Bible translation that does not follow the normal patterns of using **T** and **V** forms is that translators may simply think that **V** forms are not to be used in Bible translation. This will lead them to ignore the possibilities of using their own natural patterns of marking politeness in their translation.

Shae (2002: esp. 208) gives a clear example of a case where translated Scripture in a language of wider communication (Burmese) is read and misunderstood by people who grew up in other cultures and languages. That is, these readers misunderstand the rank that Jesus is given, receiving the impression that he is more divine than human, more distant from his disciples than intimate. Any of these other-language speakers using such a translation as part of their source text would likely misunderstand the relations between Jesus and others. They would have difficulty discerning the disciples' growing comprehension of his divinity. This is not likely to result in accurate comprehension.

## 15. Clarification on English "thee/thou" used as polite forms

In a discussion of polite forms in Bible translation, it seems logical to briefly address the issue of "thee/thou" in English. The KJV and some other older English translations use "thee/thou/thine". Today, this is (mis)understood by many to be a special way of marking politeness in addressing God. However, in the KJV (as well as Wycliffe, Geneva, Tyndale and some newer translations, including Darby, Knox and 21<sup>st</sup> Century KJV), it is merely a way of distinguishing the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular (thee/thou) from the plural (you/ye). In the KJV, it is *not* a way of marking politeness, dramatically seen in the fact that even God himself uses "thou" in addressing Satan "And the Lord said unto Satan "Whence comest thou?" (Job 1:7).

However, in some later translations, reflecting a change in later English usage, the translators have followed a practice of using "thee/thou" when addressed to God but "you" or "ye" for others (regardless of whether the addressee was singular or plural), such as NEB, Lamsa, Moffat, ASV, Rotherham, Smith/Goodspeed, Berkeley, Young, RSV, and NASB. However, this practice of using "thee/thou" in a special way for God has been discontinued in later translations which simply use "you" for addressing everybody such as the Jerusalem, NIV, NRSV, REB, Tanakh, Fox, New American Bible, NJKV, NRSV, Amplified, New World, God's Word, ESV, Holman, etc.

Today, some English speakers have a strong sense that "thee/thou/thine" should be used in addressing God, but this is not actually based on a correct understanding of how the KJV uses

2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns. If translators follow English translations that use “thee/thou”, they need to be very aware of how each translation uses these forms.

## 16. Conclusion

I do not want to be interpreted as demanding that every language that systematically marks degrees of solidarity/power must use these linguistic means in Scripture translation. For reasons best understood by native speakers, most translations of Scripture in Amharic, French, German, Russian and Spanish do not contain these. (Maybe this should be reconsidered, but that is a decision for insiders.) I do plead that when the RL does mark power and solidarity distinctions in normal usage, translators should think long and hard and have valid reasons for not using these forms in their translations.

“Faithfulness in courtesy-idioms is part of faithful translation” (Bishop 1953:34).

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to many who have stimulated my thinking on this topic and provided and explained data and translated for me. At the risk of forgetting somebody, I must thank Bruce Adams, Carole Barrera, Brad Chamberlain, Renee Barengo Massouh, Mary Breeze, Ruth Cremer, Carole Fennig, Carolyn Ford, Marie Gums, Rolando Gonzalez, Alec Harrison, Paul Headland, Bill Henning, Mary Hopkins, Kendall Isaac, Kebede Hordofa Janko, John Maire, Phillip Pope, and Vitaly Voinov (whose name should appear twice for all his help). Of course, I alone am liable for any mistakes in understanding or reporting their data.

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Addendum:

After this article was completed, the author became aware of a useful article in a similar vein:

Van der Spuy, R. 2010. “Showing respect” in Bible Translation. *Acta Theologica* 30:158-73.