Theory and Practice in Bible Translation

by Paul Ellingworth

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In order to have a useful conversation, three conditions must be met. First, the people talking must both be interested in the subject under discussion. Second, they must speak the same language. And third, they must approach the subject from different points of view, so that they can say something fresh to another.

Scholars and Translators

Conversation between biblical scholars on the one hand, and Bible translators and translation specialists on the other, has sometimes been less useful than it could have been, because one (or more) of these conditions was not fulfilled. Biblical scholars have sometimes been more concerned with internal academic debates than with helping ordinary people to understand the Bible; or translation people have sometimes failed to take time to explore in sufficient depth the implications and background of the texts they were translating; so the first condition was not met. Or the writings of biblical scholars may have expressed a particular critical or theological outlook, while translators may have been unduly preoccupied with a particular linguistic trend; so the second condition was not met. Or else (a situation perhaps more common in the past, but not unknown today), the translators themselves have lived for so long within the circle of traditional biblical scholarship that it was hard for fresh ideas to break through from anywhere else; so the third condition was not met.

Such difficulties in communication were always unfortunate, not only because the two groups had so much to learn from one another, but especially because the distinction between them is largely artificial. Every Bible translator has to be, or become, to some extent a biblical scholar; and since the New Testament, at least, is written in a language which is no longer alive, the work of every biblical scholar involves translation. Moreover, many Bible translators are not only scholars but academics. Nothing is more exciting than to watch such translators, accustomed, perhaps, to listing different exegetical options in a commentary, grappling with the need to decide what they will actually write as their translation of some difficult verse.

Yet the world is full of tensions which should not exist, but do; and it often happens in practice that translation people and academics live rather different lives, with different priorities, working towards rather different ends. So although conversation between them is necessary, and is immensely useful, it has to be worked for.

HORIZONS OF UNDERSTANDING

Two important publications have recently provided encouraging evidence that, in some places at least, biblical scholars share with translators a keen interest in the communication of the biblical message; that they are ready to learn and use the language of linguistics and translation theory; and that they are willing to listen carefully and respond constructively to those whose main concern is the practical one of translating the scriptures. The title of this article should not be taken to mean that in this conversation, the biblical scholars are assumed to provide all the theory, and translation people all the practice. In fact, there is much to be learned, both theoretically and practically, from each of these books. However, since this article is not a complete review of either[1], its contribution to the discussion will be based on practical experience in translation, and any theoretical considerations will arise out of this.

Anthony C. Thiselton's *The Two Horizons*[2] (TH) is a revised doctoral thesis of unusual scope and depth; *New Testament Interpretation*[3](NTI), to which Thiselton contributes essays on 'Semantics and New Testament Interpretation' and 'The New Hermeneutic', is a symposium by British scholars described in the editor's Foreword as conservative evangelicals. The authors' theological position may well have had a positive influence on their interest in the wider communication of the meaning of biblical texts.

In the editorial introduction to NTI, I. H. Marshall suggests that the respective tasks of interpreters and translators of the Bible may not only complement each other, but actually overlap. Among the things to be done in trying to understand a biblical passage, he lists in second place 'understanding the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of the passage in order to give a good *translation* of it', and adds: 'Translation is of great importance, and there is a case that it is the goal of interpretation rather than a preliminary stage on the journey, since the precise character of a translation is moulded by our total understanding of the passage' (NTI 12). In a note, Marshall refers to a hermeneutical principle which is confirmed in the practical experience of every translator: 'The "circular" nature of interpretation is evident at this point. On the basis of a

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1 *The Two Horizons* was reviewed by the present writer in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 53, 1981, 178f.

2 Anthony C. Thiselton: *The Two Horizons. New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein.* Exeter: The Paternoster Press, and Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980. xx + 484pp., £15.00.

3 I. H. Marshall (ed.): *New Testament Interpretation. Essays on Principles and Methods.* Exeter: The Paternoster Press 1977; revised edition 1979. 412pp., £6.50.

provisional translation of a passage, one proceeds to interpret the details; this in turn may lead to a revision of the translation' (NTI 17).

Translators will also accept the need for understanding of language to be enriched by experience of life. We are reminded that while Luther was translating the Bible, 'he went to the slaughterhouse to see how animals were killed in order the better to understand language about sacrifice' (TH 116). C. H. Dodd in fact followed Luther's example while the New English Bible was being made. A butcher at London's Smithfield Market, after reading through the committee's list of suggested modern equivalents for 'fatted calf', is said to have commented: 'Well, we've got our own technical terms for them things. We calls 'em fatted calves.'

The Contribution of Linguistics

It is probably Thiselton's essay on semantics (NTI 75-104) which contributes most to the conversation between biblical scholars and translation people. He gives a clear and succinct introduction to the work of linguists from Saussure to John Lyons, not forgetting such specialists in Bible translation as Eugene A. Nida, Charles R. Taber, and William L. Wonderly. No one can read these pages attentively without questioning the view that meaning lies in words rather than in sentences or speech-acts; or that grammar determines meaning; or that the present meaning of a term can be discovered from its etymology. Thiselton's moderate view of the Whorf hypothesis, namely "that the structure of a language may influence a culture in terms of its thought" (NTI 87, cf. TH 136f.), is similar to that reached along a different path by Nida[4].

Thiselton has particularly important things to say about metaphor[5], and about the positive uses of vagueness. He points out that to replace a live metaphor by a simile or a literal expression often involves the loss of an essential dimension of surprise which stimulates the receptor to think for himself. On these grounds, he criticises TEV's rendering of 'put on Christ' (Gal. 3.27) by 'take upon yourselves the qualities of Christ himself.' This point has been taken in current editions of TEV, which read: 'You are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself.' How-

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4 E. A. Nida, 'Linguistic and Semantic Structure', in Albert H. Marckwardt (ed.): *Studies in Languages and Linguistics*. Ann Arbor: English Language Institute, University of Michigan Press 1964, 13-33. Reprinted in E. A. Nida: *Exploring Semantic Structures*. Munich: W. Fink 1975, 160-178; and in E. A. Nida: *Language Structure and Translation*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press 1975, 47-70.

5 NTI 94f., cf. TH 132.

ever, metaphors are so language-specific that the translator sometimes has to choose between loss of tension and near-total loss of meaning[6].

By 'vagueness', Thiselton does not mean deliberate ambiguity in the text, still less irresponsible sitting-on-the-fence in translation. His main point is that 'when the New Testament interpreter comes across a super-ordinate term like *kakia*, badness, it is a mistake to insist on a greater degree of precision than that suggested by the text' (NTI 94, partly italicised in the text). One may generally agree, while recognising that taxonomies, like metaphors, vary so freely from one language or domain to another that the principle is not always easy to apply in practice, at least within a given register.

Despite Thiselton's grasp of developments in linguistics, and their relevance for New Testament interpretation, he has certain reservations, moderately expressed, about the application of generative-transformational grammar to translation.

First, he notes that 'the translator must be on guard against thinking of semantic equivalence simply in cognitive terms'. For example, 'decease' and 'departure from this life' may have 'emotive, cultural, or religious

overtones of meaning' which are lacking in the kernel sentence 'he dies' (NTI 98). On this point, he refers to Nida and Taber's chapter on connotative meaning[7] as evidence that translation specialists are aware of this danger, and more recent publications could now be cited in confirmation of this[8]. In any case, even in the heyday of transformational grammar, it was recognised that it was only one useful tool among others for the translator[9], and it was applied selectively[10].

Secondly, Thiselton believes that 'the notion of kernel sentences comes too near for comfort to Wittgenstein's earlier notions in the *Tractatus* about elementary propositions', a comment which is also related to 'theories about a "universal" grammar of objects, events, abstracts and relations' (NTI 98). It is difficult to respond concisely to this objection,

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6 The bibliography, NTI 103, note 80, includes J. de Waard: 'Biblical Metaphors and their Translation', in *The Bible Translator* 25 (1974), 107-116, and one may now add J.-C. Margot, *Traduire sans Trahir. La théorie de la traduction et son application aux textes bibliques.* Lausanne: Éditions l'Age d'Homme 1979, 279-294. See also J. Beekman and J. Callow: *Translating the Word of God.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan 1974, 124-150.

7 E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber: *The Theory and Practice of Translation.* Leiden: Brill for United Bible Societies, second ed. 1974, 91-98. Cf. E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translation.* Leiden: Brill 1964, 113f.

8 In addition to the works mentioned in note 4, see J.-C. Margot, *op. cit.*, 109-120.

9 E. A. Nida, 'Linguistic Theories and Bible Translating', in *The Bible Translator* 23 (1972), 301-8.

10 Too selectively for some linguists; cf. the extended review of Nida and Tabor, *op. cit.*, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 19 March 1970, 299-301, by Margaret Masterman.

but two comments may be made. First, there is no evidence of significant direct influence from the earlier Wittgenstein on translation theory as applied to Bible translation[11]. Secondly, the categories of object, event etc. are essentially semantic rather than grammatical — even, one suspects, in Wittgenstein's extended use of the word 'grammar'.

A Case Study

Thiselton's reservations about transformational grammar can best be seen by looking in some detail at a particular example. He mentions, apparently with approval, the use of transformational techniques to resolve the ambiguity of such expressions as 'the love of God' in 1 John, and 'light of the world' in Mt. 5.14, but then continues:

> Transformational grammar often seeks to make explicit elements of meaning which are implied, but not expressed, in a sentence . . . This principle is a positive value in Bible translation, provided it is recognised that, once again, translation inevitably becomes *interpretation*. Sometimes it is possible that this technique of making linguistic elements explicit goes further than the text allows. Thus it is questionable whether *Today's English Version* is justified in translating *kai idôn ho Iêsous tên pistin autôn* as 'Jesus saw *how much* faith they had' (Mark 2.5). The R.S.V. simply has 'when Jesus saw their faith'. But presumably the translators of *Today's English Version* would claim to be making explicit what *they judged* was implicit in the text (NTI 97: cf. TH 132).

It is perhaps fortunate that no other example is cited at this point, because the phrase quoted from Mk. 2.5 raises more problems in translation than one might expect. It is possible that in 'adding' the words 'how much', the TEV translators were unconsciously influenced by such texts as Mt. 8.10 and Lk. 7.9, where RSV's 'not even in Israel have I found such faith' somewhat undertranslates *tosoutos*. Be that as it may, the TEV strategy is not simply a matter of 'hotting-up' the narrative, *à la Living Bible*, by overtranslating the reference to faith. One might, it is true, claim that to do even this would be in keeping with the general tone of a striking story strikingly told; however, to overemphasise 'seeing their faith' could disturb the emotive balance of the narrative by anticipating the climax of v 12. This was apparently the view of the Italian common language translators, who have simply 'when Jesus saw the faith of these men'[12]. In this verse, TEV lies midway between the relatively literal

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11 There are passing references to Wittgenstein's later *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) in E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translation*, 7, and *Componential Analysis of Meaning*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton 1975, 269; cf. J.-C. Margot, *op. cit.*, 78n.

12 *Parola del Signore. Il Nuovo Testamento*. Leumann (Torino): Elle Di Ci, and Rome: Alleanza Biblica Universale 1976.

Italian version, and the German common language translation[13]: 'When Jesus saw how much trust (*Vertrauen*) they had in him . . .', the last two words of which embody an additional element of 'interpretation'. It is tempting to dismiss this translation as an example of the supposed Teutonic tendency to push things to extremes.

In fact, there is much more to the problem than this. Questions to be answered by translators of this verse include the following: (1) Is the collocation 'see . . . faith' possible or natural in the receptor language? (2) Which of the possible translations of 'faith' are current in common, as distinct from church, language? (Note in passing that the question has to be asked afresh for each related part of speech: the German noun *Glaube* (faith) has 'churchy' overtones to which the corresponding verb *glauben* (believe) appears immune). (3) Who is the object or goal of 'faith'? The German translators opted for Jesus as the goal; it is possible, though perhaps less likely, that the goal is God. In some languages, it is necessary to specify which; in others, it is desirable to do so. (4) In the phrase 'their faith', what is the antecedent of 'their': the paralysed man's bearers alone, or the paralysed man as well? Few if any of these questions can be
 answered directly by the application of transformational techniques; though what one might call transformational ways of thinking, when combined with a sensitivity to connotations, may suggest ways of working out in translation the answer to question (2).

The Limits of Translation

This small practical example of work on the interface between translation and interpretation opens up the important theoretical question of the relation between the two. Part of the problem is that each term, especially 'translation', is used both in a strict sense, as in the quotation from Marshall on page 3, and with an extended meaning. In his essay on 'The New Hermeneutic', Thiselton follows Fuchs and Ebeling in defending the position that 'the New Testament requires hermeneutical translation no less than it obviously requires linguistic translation' (NTI 309). Similarly, 'the texts must translate us, before we can translate them, and . . . the truth has "ourselves" as its object' (NTI 315). To this, Bible translators will immediately object: 'This isn't what we mean by translation', and within their own terms of reference, they are right. Yet Fuchs and Thiselton are right too, on another level. In the interests of clarity and understanding, it is therefore important to define terms.

The translator's particular task is to move from A (the original

[13] *Die Gute Nachricht. Das Neue Testament in heutigem Deutsch.* Stuttgart: Bibelanstalt 1967, ²1971.

message) to B (the receptor-language text or translation). The route he follows may be complicated and indirect; often, he will need to look back to A to check his bearings. When the translator has reached B, his task as a translator is done.

But translators are human beings too; and most Bible translators are Christians. As such, they do not lose interest in the Bible when their translation is passed for press. If their work proves effective, it will challenge its readers, potentially a whole language community, to undertake a reverse pilgrimage from B to A; that is, in translation terms, to 'analyse' its own situation and presuppositions; to relate or 'transfer' them to the world of the Bible, and relate them by a process of 'restructuring' to the biblical message. If this proves difficult or impossible, the community will ask itself whether the reason for this is just that times have changed, or whether the Bible is trying to tell it something it has forgotten, or never known.

TRANSLATION OR TRANSCULTURATION?

Thiselton approaches this theme in reaction to D. H. Kelsey, who complains in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*[14] about the misuse of 'translation' as a metaphor. Thiselton thinks Kelsey is wrong. 'While we accept that there is a difference *in degree* between strictly linguistic translation and hermeneutical translation, we cannot accept that there is a difference *in kind* (TH 130). Nida and Taber's *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (5) is quoted in support of the statement that 'it is axiomatic in modern translation theory that we cannot draw a sharp dividing-line between translation and interpretation' (TH 131). Even cultural translation, exemplified in J. B. Phillips' 'a woman . . . ill from some psychological disease' (Luke 13.11)[15], is still translation; there is still, according to Thiselton, 'conceptual continuity' between this and a strictly linguistic translation (and presumably, therefore, between Phillips and the original text). As usual in dynamic equivalent translation, the wording has changed, but the sense, it is suggested, is in 'continuity' with the original.

It may be questioned whether this line of argument, or even the appeal to Nida and Taber, is entirely well founded. It is of course logically possible to say that linguistic and cultural translation (more precisely, translation proper and transculturation) are related though distinct. Most translators will tend to emphasise the distinction between translation and

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14 Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1975.

15 The revised edition of J. B. Phillips: *The New Testament in Modern English* (London: Collins 1972) goes further in the same direction: '. . . ill from some psychological cause'.

transculturation, while some theologians, with Thiselton, will tend to emphasise the continuity. But the distinction is not just a matter of taste or professional specialization; nor is it directly related to the dynamic-equivalence principle, though there are significant analogies[16]. It is a matter of fundamental principle. Translation proper replaces one set of essentially arbitrary linguistic signs by another; transculturation involves a change of objects and events in the world to which language refers. The distinction between translation and transculturation is *practically essential* for translators, whose task is to produce a text whose meaning is not merely in continuity with that of the original, but as closely as possible identical to it. (There is physical continuity between one end of a DNA chain and the other, and historical continuity between Mt. 16.18 and the first Vatican Council). But the distinction is also *hermeneutically essential* for interpreters.

The central task of TH is to explore the implications of Gadamer's view that understanding takes place as a 'fusion of horizons' between the past text and the present reader. Thiselton stresses that 'this fusion must not be such that the tension between past and present is covered up', just as

Gadamer states that 'the hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension . . . but consciously bringing it out' (TH 317)[17].

So What is Translation?

For most readers of a translation, the translation *is* the text; they depend on it entirely; there is no appeal beyond the translation to the original. Appeal to other translations is necessarily inconclusive, and this may be the main reason for the insecurity which drives many such readers to attribute excessive value to a particular translation. The translator's task is thus limited on two sides. On the one hand, he must not cover up the cultural and historical strangeness of the text. On the other hand, he must not trespass into the area in which, if his work results in understanding, the reader will experience for himself the fusion between his own horizon of experience and that of the text. On the one hand, the old text[18] has been written, once for all, in its own time and place. On the other hand, this old text, once translated, is intended to come to new life in the understanding of the reader; but that is a spontaneous 'coming-to-

[16] P. D. Fueter, 'Dynamic Equivalent Interpretation', in *The Bible Translator* 35 (1974), 344-51.

[17] Quotation from H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed & Ward 1975, 273; German *Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen: Mohr ³1972, 290.

[18] That is, the canonical text on which Bible translations are based. It is of course recognized that diachronically, biblical and other texts may be the product of a long development.

speech of the thing itself'[19], in which the translator, and indeed the author, have no *locus standi*, no right to interfere. The translator is thus strictly an intermediary. He does not create the text, and must not rewrite it. He does not create the situation in which the text speaks afresh, and he cannot control it. His sole but inalienable function is that of replacing one set of arbitrary linguistic signs by another, grammatically different but semantically equivalent, set of equally arbitrary linguistic signs[20]. He is a midwife, not a parent; and even parents must some day let their children go.

19 TH 343, referring to Gadamer's expression *das Zur-Sprache-Kommen der Sache selbst.*

20 Wherever there is a danger that the non-linguistic strangeness of the translated text will be misunderstood, or not understood, by the intended readers, additional information should be supplied in the form of introductions, notes, and other readers' helps.