Communication and Bible translation

Iver Larsen,
SIL Senior Translation Consultant, Frichsvej 30, DK-8464 Galten
iveralarsen@gmail.com

Abstract: The paper describes the fundamental difference between two types of translations: Literal and meaning-based. It gives an overview of Relevance Theory as a theory of communication that is crucial for a theory of translation. It also discusses 5 criteria used when producing a meaning-based translation. The criteria are illustrated by several examples form English and Danish translations.

Keywords: Literal, meaning-based, relevance theory, accuracy, naturalness, clarity, logic, acceptability.

Types of translation

Bible translation can be an exercise where the main focus is on finding, if possible, equivalent words in the receptor language (RL) for every word in the source language (SL), but with less attention given to the overall sense of the text in context. The focus is on following the grammatical structure of the SL as far as possible.

Or translation can be an evangelistic exercise where the focus is on communicating as clearly as possible to a new audience the meaning of the original text without requiring a lot of biblical background knowledge on the part of the audience.

The first type is commonly called *literal*, *formal equivalent* or sometimes *literary*. The second type is inspired by linguistic studies and communication theory. It may be called *meaning-based* or *functional equivalent.* The second type is commonly used in secular and professional translation work. Bible translation ought to be an inter-disciplinary effort, since it requires thorough knowledge of the Bible, Biblical languages, Biblical culture, communication principles and the receptor language.

Both types have been used in Bible translation. The first written Bible translation, the Septuagint (LXX), uses both types. Parts of the LXX are so literal that it is very difficult to understand the Greek text unless you back-translate into Hebrew, or unless the reader also knows Hebrew and looks at the Hebrew text. Some parts of the LXX are so free that we are not sure if the translator had the same Hebrew text in front of him as we have. However, most of the LXX can be described as "translationese" as noted in the introduction to the NETS translation.[1] Conybeare and Stock (1995, p. 21) describe the translation as "so deeply affected by Semitic influence as often to be hardly Greek at all, but rather Hebrew in disguise."[2]

The LXX "aimed at bringing the Greek reader to the Hebrew original rather than bringing the Hebrew original to the Greek reader."[3] This is a common description of the two types. Does the translation aim at bringing the reader to the original text or bringing the original text to the reader?

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[1] To the reader of NETS, p.xiv. A New English Translation of the Septuagint. 00 Front Matter (upenn.edu)
[2] Grammar of Septuagint Greek: Conybeare, F.C. and George Stock
[3] To the reader of NETS, p.3.

There are many examples in the New Testament showing that the authors wanted to bring the text to the reader. We can see this in the way they handled and translated passages from the Old Testament. I shall limit myself to one example.

- Deut 6:5 - Love the LORD your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *strength.*
- Matt 22:37 - Love the Lord your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *mind.*
- Mark 12:30 Love the Lord your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *mind* and with all your *strength.*
- Luke 10:27 - Love the Lord your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *strength* and with all your *mind.*

Jesus undoubtedly quoted the Hebrew text, but Matthew knew that the Greek word for heart does not include the mind as it does in Hebrew. In order to clarify this, "mind" was made explicit and "strength" made implicit. As Mark[4] was editing Matthew, he decided to include "strength" from the original Hebrew, but kept the mind. Luke followed Mark, but switched the order, or he combined the original Hebrew or LXX with Matthew.

The writers of the gospels were apparently more concerned with bringing the full sense of the command in a way that was understandable to their audience rather than copying the LXX (or Hebrew) word for word.

Intended audience

It is crucial to determine the intended audience for a Bible translation. Nida and Tabor (1982, p. 31) envisaged three different types of translation for different audiences: (1) An ecclesiastical translation reflecting traditional usage intended to be used in the churches for liturgical purposes, (2) a translation in literary language intended for the well-educated constituency and (3) a translation in the common language for the general public.

Several translations of each of these 3 types exist in English, e.g., ESV as type 1, REB as type 2 and Good News Bible as type 3. In Danish, the authorized version (AV) is a combination of type 1 and 2, the Seidelin translation is type 2, and the translations by Axel Sørensen (1881-1907), Bibelen 2020 (B20) and Bibelen på Hverdagsdansk (BpH) are of type 3. Each translation ought to be evaluated in terms of its intended audience.

My own training is in linguistics, and that is why I have worked primarily with translations of type 3 in several different languages in Africa in addition to Danish. I have been challenged by how to bridge the gap between the ancient Hebrew language, Biblical worldview and Middle-East culture on one hand and on the other hand a completely different language spoken by people with a different worldview from a different and modern culture. My aim has been to bring the Bible to the people, but I recognize that there is also a perceived need by many churches for a liturgical translation that keeps much of an old Bible tradition. The King James Bible is considered by translation consultants

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[4] As John Wenham (1991, p. 243) reminds us: "The universal tradition of the early church puts Matthew first." (Wenham suggests a date around 40 AD for Matthew and about 45 for Mark.) Relevance theory also strongly suggests that Mark was editing Matthew for a non-Jewish audience. This explains why Mark needs to give background information on Jewish traditions and why he leaves out many speeches that were directed to a Jewish audience. The recent theory of Markan priority and a two-source speculative argument is unconvincing despite its popularity in modern times.

to be the most inaccurate and outdated English version still in use, but there is a very vocal and active group of Christians with the strong belief that the King James is the only inspired and correct version.

Communication theory

For a long time, communication was considered to be a simple encoding and decoding. It can be illustrated as follows:
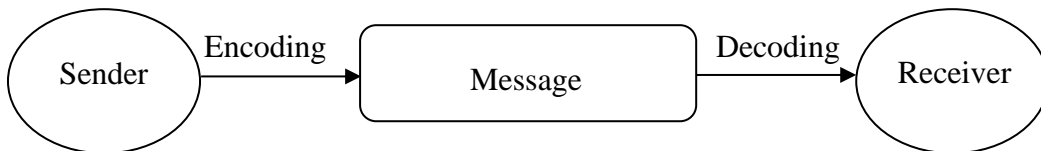

Figure 1. An old model for communication

Modern communication theory is indebted to the *Cooperative Principle* developed by Paul Grice[5] and further developed into *Relevance Theory*[6] by Sperber and Wilson. I shall here give my own representation of Relevance Theory in this illustration:
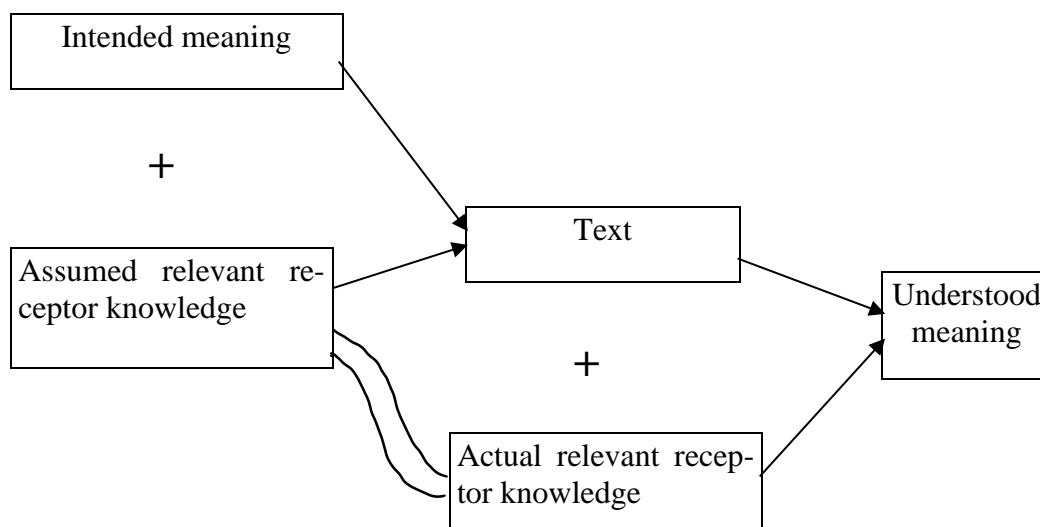

Figure 2. A basic model for communication

This model takes into account that communication does not take place in a vacuum. Any speaker or writer has a certain audience in mind, and they choose what they want to make explicit in the text or message depending on what they think that the audience already know and what is relevant for them to know. For instance, we can assume that the Gospel of Matthew was intended for a Jewish audience, and it may well have been written first in Hebrew as some of the early Church Fathers tell us. The Gospel of Mark was written for a non-Jewish audience and was probably originally intended for Greek-speaking Romans. Luke's Gospel is also primarily intended for a non-Jewish audience, but it

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[5] Cooperative principle - Wikipedia (accessed January 2021)

[6] Relevance theory - Wikipedia (accessed January 2021)

recognizes that Theophilus is hoping for an accurate and chronological account to underpin the oral teaching he has so far received. John's Gospel was also intended for a non-Jewish audience who probably already knew about the other 3 gospels.

The + sign in the model illustrates that the text produced by the writer/speaker *assumes* a lot of background knowledge available to the intended audience. If the *actual* audience is the same as the *intended* audience, their *actual* background knowledge would have a large overlap with the *assumed* background knowledge. If that is the case, the text is likely to be understood as intended, when the hearer/reader interprets the text according to their own background. They will only choose a small part of their knowledge in the interpretive process, the part that is relevant for the text. If the *actual* background knowledge is very different from what was *assumed*, the communication will not be successful.

A translator is a writer/speaker in their own right, but they are bound by loyalty to the original message. Their job is to communicate the intended message as faithfully as possible to the new audience. This can be illustrated in the following model for translation based on Relevance Theory:
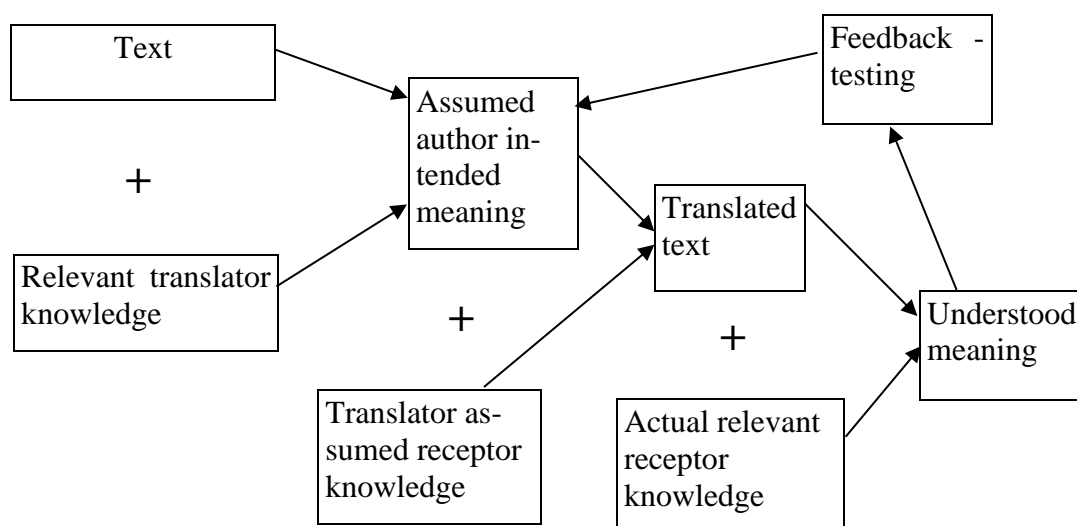

Figure 3. A model for translation

In this illustration, 2 boxes to the left have been added and one box to the right. The translator has to start with the text and interpret it based on their own relevant knowledge of both the language, the context, who the author is and what was her/his intention behind the text. In short, what is the *assumed author-intended meaning*. Since we cannot know what was inside the head of the original author, we have to do our best in exegeting the text to find the meaning. Different people will arrive at different interpretations, and that is a challenge for any translator. Because of that, some people prefer to just "translate what the text says" as literally as possible. But that has its own problems, because with that method the translated text is very likely to be interpreted by the new audience in a way that was not originally intended. To translate "The Big Apple" in Danish as "Det Store Æble" or "Der große Apfel" in German would be completely misleading. Every American knows that this refers to New York City. Let me take a simple Biblical example. If a Gospel mentions the name Jordan, the author assumed that his hearers would know that he is talking about the river Jordan in Israel. A modern reader might think he was speaking about the country of Jordan. That the intended meaning is the river, is assumed known and is therefore implicit. A translator may need to make this explicit for a new audience in order to avoid wrong meaning. Adding a word like "river" does not add anything to the in-

tended meaning, it only clarifies in order to avoid a potential misunderstanding. The translation including "river" is therefore *more faithful* to the author and his intended message than a translation without this word.

Once the translator has done his exegesis and used all his knowledge about the original language, culture and context, he becomes a communicator. He will estimate what his intended audience may already know and then produce his translated text in such a way that he hopes the new audience will be able to get the same message, using their background knowledge. As already mentioned, the more the *assumed* background knowledge has in common with the *actual* background knowledge, the greater is the chance for successful communication. In this kind of a model, it is obvious that the translation choices depend on the intended audience. It is legitimate to make *implicit information explicit*. This is a short way of saying that the translator supplies some background information that the original audience would know, but the new audience does not. Such information is added to the translation in order to be *faithful to* the communicative intention of *the original author*. It is clarifying meaning rather than adding meaning, but it has to be done with much care and restraint.

It is possible, if not necessary, to test whether the understood meaning corresponds to the meaning that the translator wanted to communicate.

Cultural thought patterns

Hebrew discourse and thought patterns are quite different from non-Semitic languages. Robert Kaplan (2001) has done research on cultural thought patterns, and the main result is illustrated in this diagram[7]:

CULTURAL THOUGHT PATTERNS IN INTER-CULTURAL EDUCATION   21

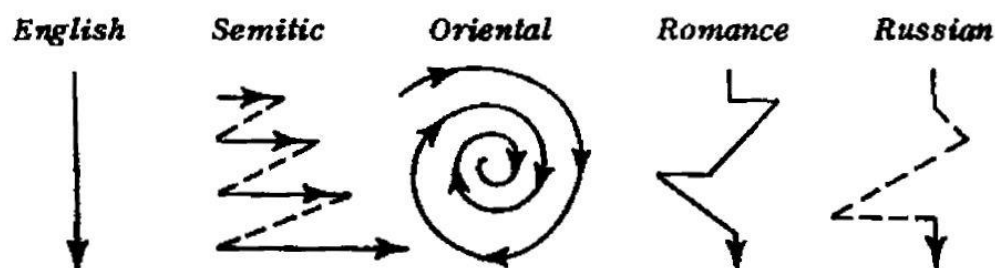English   Semitic   Oriental   Romance   Russian

Figure 4. Cultural thought patterns

English has a linear progression and we expect chronological sequence, although this sequence is being challenged in many modern films. English uses many time words to mark the chronology of a sentence, but Hebrew has very few. The Semitic pattern is iterative or circular like a modern news program. First a brief overview is given, sometimes like a title, then the topic is covered in a second round, and sometimes in a third round. A literal translation cannot take this into account and will therefore at times be quite misleading. *A literal translation is therefore not accurate*, because it *misrepresents the original* thought pattern and *intended meaning*. I can give a few examples of Hebrew circles in the Bible:

Gen 1:1 *In the beginning God created heaven and earth*. (God's Word translation).

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[7] Kaplan study (accessed January 2021)

This is the title and the whole creation story in a nutshell. But what are the details? They follow in Gen 1:2-2:3, which is then the second round. The third round of the same story with somewhat different details follows in 2:4-25.

These Hebrew circles are found throughout the Bible, but primarily in the Old Testament. Let me take a few examples from Jonah.

> Jonah 2:2-3a ²*I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me;*
>   *out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.*
>   ³*For you cast me into the deep*, (ESV)

Verse 2 covers the whole of the prayer in brief: distress – call for help – salvation. The word "for" in English is not based on any word in Hebrew, but is intended to show that the second round starts in v. 3. AV92 correctly says "You had thrown me into the deep" in order to show that the author starts again at the beginning of the story and then goes over the same ground in more detail. Even the KJV recognized this and said: "For thou hadst cast me into the deep."

The AV92 did not recognize the lack of chronology in Jonah 4:5a and says: "*Then Jonah went out of the city.*" NIV is one of the few versions that understood the Hebrew pattern, so they said: "*Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city.*"

Nor did AV92 recognize the lack of chronology in 4:5b. It is like the literal ESV: "*Jonah ... sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there.*" But Jonah made the booth before he sat down as indicated in CEV: "*Jonah ... made a shelter to protect himself from the sun. He sat under the shelter, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh.*"

There is another such title or brief overview in Jonah 3:5 that is not recognized by most translations:

> The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. (Jonah 3:5 NIV)

The Ninevites believed that Jonah brought them a message from God. A fast was declared in the city and all put on sackcloth from the highest officials to the lowest citizen. The third person form "they" often functions like a passive or indefinite subject like Danish and German "man". The details come in verses 6-9:

> For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered [him] with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused [it] to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God. (KJV)

The word "for" in KJV was an attempt to show that this part explains what has already been said. The word that came to the king was Jonah's message and not that the people had declared a fast. The king left his throne and dressed in sackcloth. However, we again have a lack of chronology, because the king would have called his nobles together while sitting on his throne. They discussed what to do and then the king and his nobles issued a decree. The king was the first to follow the decree when he left his throne and dressed in sackcloth.

There is a similar iterative or circular/spiral structure in Romans 7 which I shall briefly illustrate:

> Rom 7:5-6 ⁵*For **when we were** in the realm of the flesh, **the sinful passions aroused by the law** were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for **death**. ⁶**But now**, by dying to what once bound us, **we have been released from the law** so that we serve in **the new way of the Spirit**, and not in **the old way of the written code**. (NIV2011, emphasis mine).*

Paul briefly explains the difference between before and after being ***released from the law***. Verse 5 is then further explained in two rounds, first 7:7-13 and then 7:14-25. Verse 6 is covered in detail in chapter 8. Without recognizing the circular Hebrew thought pattern, it is easy to go astray in the exegesis.

Five criteria for translation

A meaning-based, meaning-oriented, idiomatic, communicative or dynamic, functionally equivalent translation (a pet child has many names) is based on 5 criteria:

1. **Accuracy** – communicate the same meaning as originally intended
2. **Clarity** – communicate in a way that the intended audience will understand
3. **Naturalness** – use the normal language that the intended audience use
4. **Acceptability** – if some readers reject the translation, they will not read it
5. **Logic** – if the translation does not make logical sense in context, the translation is probably wrong

Some of these criteria pull in different directions. The criterion of accuracy is debated, because it depends on whether the focus is on the words or the underlying meaning. Some consider a translation that keeps close to the words and grammar of the original to be the most accurate, even if it is not understandable. Others consider a translation that communicates the underlying meaning to be more accurate and faithful to the original writer. Of course, the tricky point is whether the translator has understood the intended meaning correctly.

In the following I shall take some examples to illustrate these criteria. I shall use both English and Danish versions (with an English translation).

First, two instances where **logic has failed**.

> John 21:11 *Simon Peter went up into the boat and pulled the net to land* (AV92)
> *Peter went back to the boat and pulled the net to land* (B20)

The net was so full of big fish that 7 fishermen could not haul it into the boat, so they tied it to the back end of the boat where it still was in v. 11. If Peter wanted to drag it further up on the shore, why go up in the boat? There is no way he could pull the net into the boat, and the text does not say that he tried to do that. There is no word for "boat" in the Greek text, and it is also inaccurate to add it, because it is not implied. If the translators had used their common sense and logical thinking, they should have realized that this cannot be the correct exegesis. The faulty exegesis is caused by a misunderstanding of 21:7 where Peter girded himself with his outer garment and jumped into the water. Somehow translators thought that Peter wanted to swim to shore, even though there is no hint at all in the text that he intended to do so or actually did it. From this mistaken assumption, translators picture Peter being on the shore before v. 11, so they cannot understand that he "went up". The correct, accurate and logical translation is found in Seidelin and BpH (He waded up on the shore pulling the net along.) Further details in Larsen (1988).[8]

> 1 Tim 2:15 *But she shall be saved, by the childbirth – provided they hold on to faith and love and holiness with self-control*. (AV92)

The change from "she" to "they" makes it unclear. That a woman or women are to be saved by childbirth makes no sense at all. Let us check some other versions:

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[8] Did Peter enter the boat (John 21: 11)?

> *But because the woman gives birth to children, she can still be saved, if she lives a respectable life and hold on to the faith, love and God.* (B20).

It makes no sense that it should be a sin to have a child or that it is required of a woman to bear children in order to be saved.

These non-sensical translations may be caused by the translators giving up on understanding the text and therefore making a literal translation in the case of the AV (92). The translation of B20 illustrates the well-known adage: "You cannot translate what you do not understand." I have discussed it in Larsen (2018).[9]

> AV48[10] is a bit better: *But she shall be saved through the fulfilment of her call as a mother – provided they hold on to faith and love and holiness with decency.*

BpH has: *But the woman will obtain/reach to the eternal life by focusing on her call to bring up her children and live a sensible life in faith and love and holiness.*

Immediate context

When we talk about logic and common sense, it is very important to look at the **immediate context** which carries more weight than a distant context. One should also take into account Grice's Cooperative Principle and Relevance Theory.

As an example, let us take John 3:5-6:

> *Unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.* (NET)

The immediate context is first the statement by Jesus in v. 3: "*Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" If we think of the Hebrew iterative/circular thought pattern, this is a brief overview which is intended to arouse curiosity. Jesus is doing exactly the same in John 4:10 "*You would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.*" It is somewhat cryptic and an invitation for further questions. It is also very memorable, exactly because it is short and cryptic.

Nicodemus was bewildered as we can see from his response in v. 4: "*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*"

According to the Cooperative Principle, Jesus has an obligation to explain. He is quite willing to do that, since he expected a response like this, so he expands on his statement in 3:5-6. V 6. clarifies the contrast between the physical birth and the spiritual birth. Of course, Jesus is not saying that one needs to be born physically a second time. He is saying that it is not enough to be born physically, one also has to be born spiritually. In this context, it seems very likely that "born of spirit" in v. 5 matches "born of the Spirit" in v. 6. Because of this parallel connection, the first part of the sentence in v. 6 "born of flesh" is the same as "born of water" in v. 5.

Now, the expression "born of water" is not common. It is a metonym, where one idea stands for a related idea. The same metonym occurs only one other time in the Bible, namely 1 John 5:6 "*Jesus Christ is the one who came by water and blood – not by the water only, but by the water and the blood.*" The two metonyms here are **water** and **blood**. **Blood** is a common metonym for **death**, and **water** is the not so common metonym for **birth**. The point of this passage is to prove that Jesus did come as a human being into this world by way of his birth and he also died as a human being. There is no spirit that entered Jesus after birth and left before death. **Since every child is born out of water,**

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[9] Salvation through childbearing.
[10] Previous authorized version.

it is logical to see the connection between water and physical birth. The problem is that it is not a metonym used in English (or Danish), so one has to rely on context. If people rely on church tradition, they may well reach a different exegesis. For further details, see Larsen (1990).[11]

Since this is an important theological bone of contention, it is one of those places where it is advisable to be more literal than usual, even in an idiomatic translation. Although I do not think the text is unclear or difficult to understand, an expanded translation is likely to be rejected because of church traditions. This is a good place for a footnote. Footnotes are helpful to explain places where there are cultural mismatches which cannot be overcome in the translation itself, or where there are different exegetical opinions among Bible scholars. It may not be possible to footnote all such differences of opinion, since theologians are known to disagree on almost everything.

There are times where appealing to logic is not enough, because we simply do not have sufficient information about the language or culture of the original. For instance, Matthew 24:28 has a proverbial saying which nobody seems to understand:

Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. It might be a proverb like "where there is smoke, there is fire", but because of the uncertainly about the meaning, translators are hesitant to substitute one proverb for another, so they tend to give up and translate it literally.

Combining evidence

I shall give an example where textual criticism, Greek discourse, Greek grammar and historical data all come into play. First the data from various Greek manuscripts.

The textual problem is the presence or absence of one Greek letter η written like H in the early manuscripts that use capital letters. It is the definite article, so it is a question of whether the text should say "the census" or "a census". The evidence is divided with most manuscripts supporting the presence of the article. The major early manuscript lacking it is the B manuscript (Vaticanus). Nestle-Aland (NA$^{25-28}$) decided not to include it, but the Majority Text has it like the following:

Αὕτη ἡ ἀπογραφὴ πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου[12]

The NA critical apparatus cites the first hand of Sinaiticus ℵ as supporting the absence, but a later hand corrected the mistake. Let us look at this manuscript:
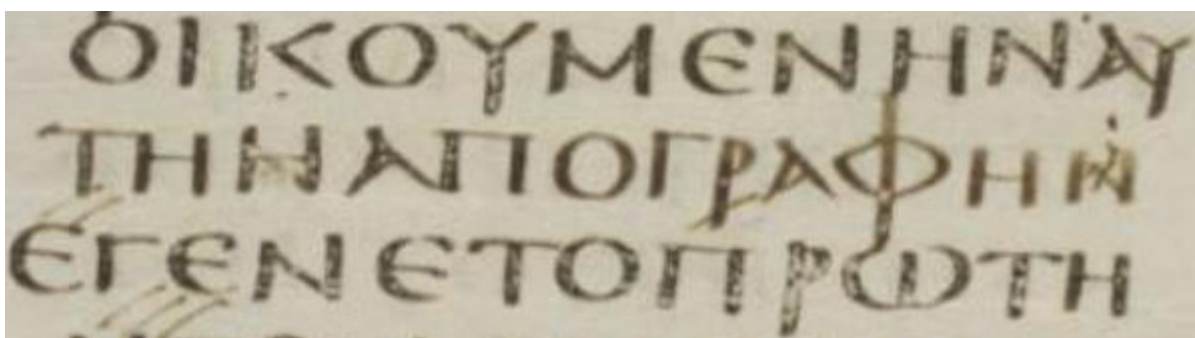

Figure 5. Luke 2:2 in Sinaiticus

The first hand has "this census" (AUTHN APOGRAFHN) in the accusative. This is nonsense, because the verb used later (it became) cannot have an object. It is obviously a copying error, maybe caused by the similar ending HN of the previous word OIKOUMENHN. It is also possible that the

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[11] Jesus came through water and blood   Born of water and John 3 5.

[12] Quoted from Robinson and Pierpont (2005).

letters AUTHH were wrongly copied as AUTHN. Anyway, this error was corrected later by changing AUTHN to AUTHH and deleting the final letter of the next word so that it now reads AUTH H APOGRAFH.

The important and good quality manuscript Alexandrinus (A) has AUTH H APOGRAFH and looks as follows:
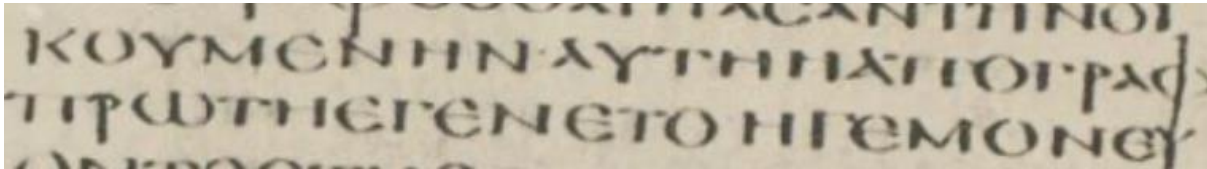

Figure 6. Luke 2:2 in Alexandrinus

The later and less reliable manuscript D reads

Αὕτη ἐγένετο ἀπογραφὴ πρώτη

This manuscript is known for a number of deliberate changes. It has moved the verb forward compared with all others to say "This became census first" instead of "This census first became".

The NA tradition is often leaning towards the Westcott-Hort tradition and putting a lot of weight on the Alexandrian manuscripts of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. The theory is that the older manuscripts are better and closer to the original, because they are older. However, the study by Royse (2008) has shown that the early Egyptian papyrus manuscripts are not as reliable as earlier thought. They have many accidental mistakes, additions and omissions.

So, from these manuscripts we have 3 competing readings:

1. AUTH H APOGRAH PRWTH EGENETO (A) – THIS census happened ahead of… (majority)
2. AUTH APOGRAFH PRWTH EGENETO (B) – Vaticanus manuscript (a few mss)
3. AUTH APOGRAFH EGENETO PRWTH (D) – Bezae manuscript (alone)

We need to look at Greek discourse grammar. A noun phrase like "this census" requires the definite article because the demonstrative word marks it as definite. But the demonstrative can occur before or after giving two different meanings. See Larsen (2001).[13] If it occurs after the noun (H APOGRAFH AUTH), it shows a back reference to an earlier mention as in "this (aforementioned) census". If it occurs before the noun (AUTH H APOGRAFH), it means THIS census in contrast to another known census. See Larsen (1985).[14] I have used capital THIS to indicate such a contrast as seen in 1. above.

If there is no article, the demonstrative stands alone and is not part of a noun phrase. We see this in numbers 2 and 3. This would be translated as "This (census) happened (as) a census ahead of…". When D moves the word EGENETO (happened/took place) forward, it was probably to avoid misreading PRWTH as if it went with the APOGRAFH.

The readings of 2 and 3 do not make sense, so the English translations adjust it by adding the definite article and use "was" rather than "happened, took place". If Luke had wanted to communicate "was", he would have used a past tense of the verb to be - ἦν (was). For instance, NIV says: "*This **was the** first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.*" KJV says: "*This taxing **was first** made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.*"

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[13] Larsen (2001)
[14] Larsen (1985)

KJV follows the Majority text, but it loses the contrastive focus on THIS. If we make a more literal translation from Greek, it is easier to see that it just does not make sense: "This (census) happened (as) a first/ahead of census while Quirinius was governor of Syria." Why would Luke compare with other censuses under Quirinius? He wanted to give a date of THIS census, not talk about how many took place under Quirinius.

As the footnote in NIV11 shows, there is also the problem of how best to translate PRWTH. The footnote says: Or *This census took place before*. There is no word for "while" in the Greek text, but a genitive absolute giving a time period. The word PRWTH is an adjective sometimes used as an adverb. The meaning is "preceding in time, space or rank." It is therefore better to think of the meaning as "ahead of" rather than "first". When used as an adverb in the sense "before", it requires a genitive. It is therefore likely that a more accurate translation is: "*THIS census happened before (the one you know about) under Quirinius's governorship of Syria*."

Now let us look at Relevance Theory. Luke mentions a very famous census while Quirinius was governor of Syria in AD 6. He mentions it is Acts 5:37: "*After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt.*" Luke does not see any reason to say more about this famous census and he assumes that Theophilus is very much aware of it. It is well documented in history books. However, the census when Jesus was born was not a famous census and not recorded in our limited history books. So, in order to avoid confusion in the mind of Theophilus, Luke clarifies the contrast by saying that it is not the famous census you might immediately think of: "*THIS census took place before (the one you know about under) Quirinius's governorship of Syria.*" Relevance Theory explains the grammar of the Greek text much better than any other possible solution to this problem.

Many scholars claim that Luke was mistaken here, but it is more likely that *they* are mistaken. After all, Luke was a careful historian close to the time it happened.

In terms of communication and translation, my point is that a very thorough exegesis ought to precede any translation effort. But even after that, difficult interpretive choices have to be made.

Accuracy

All translators agree that accuracy in Bible translation is paramount. But one cannot obtain accuracy without a careful and thorough exegesis. It is not only a matter of knowing the original language well, but also knowing the discourse patterns and cultural background.

Clarity and naturalness

These characteristics are important for a functionally equivalent translation, but not so much for a literal translation. Luther considered these to be important, and he did quite well in his translation. Even the first Danish translation from 1550 was fairly understandable and natural in Danish, partly because German and Danish are related languages. This Danish translation was rejected by a university professor, Hans Povlsen Resen, in 1604, because he felt that it was too far removed from the Hebrew text. It was not literal enough. So, he produced a translation that was so unclear and unnatural that it was very difficult to read. It was slightly revised by bishop Hans Svane, and because this bishop had close connections to the Danish king, his translation supplanted Luther's Bible in Denmark. Since then, we have had literal versions as the standard in Denmark, although they have become somewhat less literal over the years. However, the 1992 version is more literal than the earlier version.

Ambiguity

How a translator deals with ambiguity depends on whether it is interpreted as an intended ambiguity or perceived ambiguity. Sometimes we assume an ambiguity where it probably was not an ambiguity to the original audience, nor was it intended as an ambiguity by the writer.

Some ambiguities in a translation are the result of a very literal approach, e.g.

> *And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons* (Jdg. 3:6 ESV)
> *They intermarried with them* (GNB)
> *They intermarried with them. Israelite sons married their daughters, and Israelite daughters were given in marriage to their sons* (NLT)

Since commentators often have different interpretations of the same passage, some translators attempt to keep the perceived ambiguity. But it is rarely possible to keep the same ambiguities in the translation as one thinks are present in the original.
Beekman and Callow (2002, p. 31) make this observation:

> The literal approach to translation attempts to translate in such a form that the same number of possible interpretations will be open to the reader. In taking this approach, the translator not only introduces ambiguities which are not really ambiguities, but also runs the risk of introducing different ambiguities from those of the original text.

Some ambiguities are introduced by the need to follow the grammar of the receptor language. An obvious example in English is the pronoun "you" which introduces an ambiguity not present in Hebrew or Greek. (Is it singular or plural?) Many other ambiguities are introduced because of the differences in grammar between languages. The grammatical tenses and aspects are a problem because the system in English is very different from Greek which is again different from Hebrew. A common source of ambiguity is the genitive construction. English can keep some ambiguity in a genitive like "love of God" where Danish has to make a choice between a subjective or objective genitive. The relationship can also be one of source or description.

John's Gospel is said to have many intended ambiguities. But are they all intended?

> *And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not **comprehend** it.* (John 1:5 NKJV)
> *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not **overcome** it.* (ESV)
> *And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not **grasp** it.* (AV92)
> *And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not **overcome** it.* (AV48)

AV92 has tried very hard to keep the perceived ambiguity. Although the Greek word (καταλαμβάνω) may mean both understand and overcome, the parallel passage in John 12:35 suggests that the meaning "overcome" is intended also in 1:5. AV92 uses the same ambiguous word in Danish here, which means that the translation is neither clear nor natural. In my view the translation has introduced an ambiguity and obscurity not intended in the original.

There are times when Jesus uses words that can be used in a literal sense as well as metaphorical sense. This produces an intended ambiguity for rhetorical effect, so it is good if such ambiguities can be maintained. Let us look at one example of this:

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." (John 11:9-10 ESV)

The expression "12 hours in the day" is not talking about literally 12 hours, but about the time available for people to work. It is a metaphor. This may not communicate to a modern culture, so BpH

tried to bridge the gap by saying: "*Does the day not have 12 hours in which we must do the works of God?*" It is clearly related back to 9:4-5 which is then an important context:

> *We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.* (9:4-5 ESV)

The words "day" and "night" are literal renderings, but connected to "light" and "darkness". (cf. John 12:35 - The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going). Whereas "day" and "night" would be understood literally, "light" and "darkness" are more likely to be understood in the spiritual sense. Likewise, "stumble" has a literal sense as well the spiritual sense of making a mistake and committing a sin. The expression "light of the world" can refer both to the Sun and to Jesus. However, in the sentence *because the light is not in him* that light is obviously not the Sun, but must be spiritual light from Jesus. The translators have to be very careful here and walk the tightrope between literal senses and metaphorical senses that point to a spiritual reality. As an example of an idiomatic version that in my view did very poorly here is the CEV:

> *Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in each day? If you walk during the day, you will have light from the sun, and you won't stumble. But if you walk during the night, you will stumble, because you don't have any light."* (11:9-10 CEV)

B20 also did poorly in my view. I am not going to point out all the questionable translation choices:

> *It is no use waiting. After all, the day has 12 hours, and the one who walks during the day, does not stumble, because he sees the light here in the world. The one who walks during the night, stumbles, because he does not have any light in him.*

BpH did as follows:

> *Does the day not have 12 hours, where we must do the works of God? Those who walk in the light, do not fall, for they see the Light of the world. But those, who walk in the darkness, fall, because they do not have the light in them.*

It is important to realize that Jesus is here rebuking the disciples because they "stumbled" when they refused to go to Lazarus. They did not understand that Jesus had one last miracle to perform before he would be killed. They did not have spiritual light/insight, and they refused to follow the Light of the world (Jesus). Further details in Larsen (1986)[15].

Acceptability

Generally speaking, the church is more likely to accept a literal translation than a meaning-based one, mainly because there is a very long church tradition for literal versions. The first two meaning-based versions in English were Good News for Modern Man (1966) and the Living Bible (1962-71). They were generally rejected by the churches, but loved by the common people, because there was finally an understandable translation to read. The Living Bible sold more than 40 million copies.[16] It was also used by young people and evangelists like Billy Graham.

Acceptability is related to theology, so if a translation has a different exegesis than the reader, then that reader is likely to reject it. This is not so much a danger with literal translations, because they are usually unclear in important theological passages, so the reader and pastor can interpret the text the way he or she likes. A literal translation that is often difficult to understand also gives more power to pastors, because they are then the Biblical experts who are needed in order to explain what the Bible

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[15] *Walking in the light*
[16] The Living Bible - Wikipedia

means. I have often heard about pastors complaining, when a meaning-based version is published, for they see this as a threat to their power. They are used to explain the Bible text in their sermons, so if the congregation can understand the Bible without their help, they feel as if they are now out of work.

A translation may be unacceptable because it is clearly wrong, or because it has chosen a possible interpretation that is not the favoured one by the reader.

B20 translates John 3:5 as *Man bliver født igen ved at blive døbt og få Helligånden*. (One is born again by being baptized and getting the Holy Spirit.) This is not what the text means, and it is unacceptable outside the Lutheran church.

AV92 translates Ruth 3:7: *Derpå listede hun derhen, klædte sig af og lagde sig ved hans fødder.* (Then she tiptoed over there, undressed and laid down at his feet.) B20 says: *Ruth nærmede sig lige så stille, tog tøjet af og lagde sig ved siden af ham.* (Ruth quietly came up close (to him), took off her clothes and laid down at his side.) The exegesis here is both unacceptable and mistaken. It is also different from every other translation in the world.

Mark 10:13 says in the Lutheran AV92: *And they carried some small children to Jesus*. It has been adjusted to Lutheran theology for use in the liturgy for infant baptism in two ways. The word "little" has been added, although the Greek word can cover children up to about 12 years of age. And they have used the word "carried" rather than "brought", because it fits with infant baptism. The text has nothing to do with baptism, and certainly not infant baptism. Such a Lutheran translation is not a problem to Lutherans, but it would be considered inaccurate by Baptists, who use the same text for the blessing of infants or small children.

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