

Hermeneutics and Translation  
in Cross-cultural Settings

Hirofumi Horie (Senshu Univ.)

Bible translation is a highly specialized discipline, requiring expertise in both biblical studies and translation theory. In the wake of the growing interest in cross-cultural evangelism and a renewed awareness of its underlying biblical mandates in the latter half of the twentieth century, the evangelical churches on both sides of the Atlantic saw a need for developing scientific models for the scriptural translation. Corollary to this development was a recognition that the Scripture would not properly be understood across the cultural barriers unless the message was put in a form accessible to the indigenous people.

Under these circumstances, a new concept of translating called "dynamic (functional) equivalence" attracted the minds of the Bible translators. As linguists like Eugene A. Nida and Charles A. Taber claimed, the translator must strive for equivalence rather than identity, i.e., the emphasis should be placed upon the reproduction of the message rather than the conservation of the form of the utterance. While the "old focus", with its stress upon the preservation of the form of the message such as rhymes, plays on words, parallelism, chiasmus, etc., looked at the source language with an added interest and thus proved to be the word-centered concept, the receptor-language-oriented "new focus" is principally concerned with the idea which the message conveys. As a result, a direct access to the translated message should be feasible to the receptor. In other words, translation should be made so that today's receptor may respond to the translated message in the same manner as the original audience reacted to the message.

On top of this what perturbs the Bible translators is the increasing number of those who speak English as an acquired language. Hence they sense the need of a distinctly new translation that, instead of conforming to traditional vocabulary or literary style, seeks to express the meaning of the text in words and forms accepted as standard by people everywhere who employ English as a means of communication. In the history of the Bible translation, such an awareness was rather a recent one and for a long period of time literal translation with its twin concept of formal correspondence dominated the scene.

An example often cited is the rendering of Mark 2:19 where the translation of a semitic idiom is the focal point. The American Standard Version (ASV), reproducing a Hebrew literary style faithfully, renders: "Can the sons of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?" Today's English Version (TEV),

a thoroughgoing attempt for dynamic equivalence translation, departs somewhat radically from Semitism and translated the underlined phrase as "the guests at a wedding party", while the New International Version, adhering to its rather audacious venture to maintain a balance between the two extremes of excessive literalness and paraphrases, simply puts "the guests of the bridegroom".

It is worth stressing that translation involves more than just the rendering of something into another language. It also entails a facet of interpretation. J.B. Phillips, a renowned Bible translator, is ready to accept the word "interpretation" to characterize his work, while the Living Bible shows little hesitation in describing the book as "a paraphrase of the Old and New Testament". Is a paraphrase not a translation? One is often driven into what appears to be a paraphrase, simply because a literal translation of the original text would prove unintelligible to the people today.

There seem to be a few obvious advantages in adopting the concept of dynamic equivalence over against a rigid literal translation. A dynamic equivalence translation can make the best of one particular asset of the English language, i.e. immensity of vocabulary. Why do the Bible translators have to kowtow to the rules of language in the original text by imposing a limit upon the use of their rich source of vocabulary? In view of the non-equatability of languages, mere seeking of formal correspondence not only deprives the translation of an eloquence but it may also cause a grave misunderstanding of the textual contents on the part of the receptors. It is generally recognized that the literal translators are apt to squeeze enormous thoughts into single technical words that are full of meaning. Furthermore, departing from formal correspondence would also bring into the translation a much-needed vividness (ex. 'believe and obey' instead of 'faith and obedience' which is a strict Greek translation).

In the field of religious communication in which a message should be presented in order to achieve certain expected responses from the audience or to change their behavioral patterns, a practice of word-for-word concordance which is followed by the ASV and the Revised Standard Version proves no longer effective. The thought that the language of the Scripture are too sacred to translate in the modern sense has long hindered the development of the "new focus". Religious communication is not just informative. It must also be imperative. Other concrete features of dynamic equivalence include the frequent use of the second person which in consequence makes the message more personal. TEV often employs personal expressions thus eliminating the need for further theological terminology.

The TEV New Testament, a common language translation, deliberately avoids technical terms and

polysyllabic words. Even a minor literary idiosyncrasy was avoided in order to allow the book to reach the maximum number of people at large. In this regard, William L. Wonderly's definition of common language as that intermediate level which speakers of the different socio-educational levels have in common does not provide us with a clear-cut picture of the intended readers. However, considering the fact that this common level of language should be accessible to the uneducated but at the same time acceptable to those who are educated, one can at least define it in rather negative terms: TEV professes itself to be a "world English translation" as regionalisms and provincialisms are eschewed. Slang is avoided, since it is short-lived and strictly restricted in terms of geography and culture.

The NIV follows the same line when it claims to have recognized the worldwide character of the English language by avoiding overt Americanisms on the one hand and overt Anglicisms on the other. Due in part to its international popularity, however, the NIV has been subject to various critical remarks. One of such questions expresses the difficulty of deciphering for whom this translation is intended. One scholar claims that the translation does not reflect the language expectation of native adult speakers of American English and that it lacks "clarity and ease of reading" for a number of people who speak English as a second language. Such shortcomings could be a result of the decision made by the NIV editorial committee to serve two utterly different purposes: While the NIV professed to be a completely new translation, it also boasts of its endeavor to preserve some measure of continuity with the long tradition of translating of the Scriptures into English. In fact, the NIV in many places endorses the renderings of the King James version (KJV). Although the NIV certainly did not try to escape the problem of translations by falling back upon the citadel of the KJV, it still cannot escape criticism of being a "patchwork" translation as it oscillates between direct dependence on the tradition and the adoption of modern literary style.

A few years ago, Peter S. Cameron warned against an implied assumption that, the aim of the translator being equivalent effect, this effect is to be achieved by functional equivalence. What lies behind seems to be Cameron's strong belief that formal correspondence is not the same thing as literalism. Although he makes no reactionary plea for a retreat to the principle of formal correspondence, he still alleges that translators have been too ready to abandon formal correspondence and that dynamic equivalence upsets the rhythm of the original, which is an indivisible part of its effect. A solution he lays down is that the possibilities inherent in formal correspondence must be exhausted first.

Another complex problem lies in the fact that the scripture translation is not just a linguistic question but also an exegetical one. In many cases, the translation of the Bible is impossible without undergoing legitimate steps for exegesis. Extra care has to be taken to avoid a form of "eisegesis" — the reading in of a meaning which the author did not intend. The rendering of John 1:1 in the New World Translation (NWT), designed for the use of Jehovah's Witnesses, is a frequently quoted example. Without going into theological and grammatical niceties, it would be sufficient here to say that their rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity determined the rendering of the passage. No article is needed for Theos (God) and to translate it "a god", as the NWT did, is both incorrect and poor Greek. Another translator who encountered the perennial conflict of theology vs. grammar is Martin Luther, who, for instance, added the word "alone" after "faith" ("allein durch den Glauben") in the reference to justification in Romans 3:28. Among the English translations, TEV follows Luther's accentuation and its passage reads: ". . . a man is put right with God only through faith, . . ." Is such an "addendum" justified? Or is it simply another case of reading too much into the text?

However, by far the most difficult question to answer for dynamic equivalence advocates relates to the basic supposition of the concept. In dynamic equivalence translation, a translation is dynamic if its readers reacted to it in substantially the same way as the original readers presumably reacted to the original text, or if the translation had an impact similar to the impact that the original text had. But the problem is that, with some exceptions, we do not know how the first readers reacted to the original text. So some critics state that a translator translating for impact is using the source text and not translating it. Fears are expressed that dynamic equivalence translation may in the end open the door for unjustified theologizing, a conscious effort on the part of a translator to make adjustments in his translation to agree with his theology. It goes without saying that such an attempt should be rejected in toto. What has been brought to light is the fact that dynamic equivalence hangs in the very delicate balance.

If the ground upon which dynamic equivalence stands is so precarious, a translator should walk the path with a cautious tread. In order not to confuse author's intent for the original audience with contemporary applications of the message, a so-called two-step approach to hermeneutics should be pursued. A translator should always be conscious of the existing danger of translating the original text as if its author was speaking to the contemporary audience directly. What he has to do first and foremost is to uncover the author's intent independent of what he thinks the original author would have written had he been given a chance

to address today's audience. The exegetical exercises should precede the hermeneutical ones. As he understands the purpose of the original writer, he is deterred from attaching ideas to the original text that are utterly foreign to its initial purpose. With the clear purport of the passages, he can contextualize them in a manner meaningful to his immediate audience. One final note. A translator should always be attentive to the recent trends in the Scripture reading. In the light of a growing interest in the reading of the Scripture aloud not just in liturgical settings but also in small study groups, the translation may have to take oral language into further consideration. The translation must be readable and the translator should therefore be mindful of the rhythm of the translated book.

#### References

- Robert G. Bratcher, "The Nature and Purpose of the New Testament in Today's English Version," The Bible Translator (BT), vol. 22, no. 3.
- F.F. Bruce, History of the Bible in English (New York, 1961).
- Peter S. Cameron, "Functional Equivalence and the Mot Juste," BT, vol. 41, no. 1.
- Keith R. Crim, "Translating the Poetry of the Bible," BT, vol. 23, no. 1.
- Krikor Halebian, "The Problem of Contextualization," Missiology, vol. 11.
- Thomas N. Headland, "Anthropology and Bible Translation," Missiology, vol. 2.
- Hans Kasdorf, "Luther's Bible: A Dynamic Equivalence Translation and Germanizing Force," Missiology, vol. 6.
- Charles H. Kraft, "Dynamic Equivalence Churches," Missiology, vol. 1.
- Jack P. Lewis, The English Bible from KJV to NIV (Grand Rapids, 1981).
- Walter R. Martin, The Kingdom of the Cults (Oakland, N.J., 1965).
- A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids, 1963).
- Georges Mounin, "Hebraic Rhetoric and Faithful Translation," BT, vol. 30, no. 3.
- Barclay M. Newman, Jr., "Readability and the New International Version of the New Testament," BT, vol. 31, no. 3.
- Eugene A. Nida, "Formal Correspondence in Translation," BT, vol. 21, no. 3.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Message and Mission (Pasadena, 1960).
- Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, The Theory and Practice of Translation (Leiden, 1982).
- Jan P. Sterk, "Translating for Impact," BT, vol. 41, no. 1.
- William L. Wonderly, "Common Language and Popular Language," BT, vol. 23, no. 4.