TRANSLATING THE BIBLE: THE CASE FOR
A MEDIATING APPROACH

by

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ABSTRACT
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A MEDIATING APPROACH
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Many Evangelical Christians in America tend to prefer more literal approaches to Bible translation rather than more idiomatic ones. Their preference for this can be quite strong at times, with some even viewing those who prefer more idiomatic approaches as simply being in the wrong. In this thesis I seek to demonstrate that there are serious limitations to a literal Bible translation strategy and real benefits in recognizing the merits of a more idiomatic approach. First I examine the biblical teaching and views of important figures in church history associated with this issue. Then I show how the various translation approaches impact theology. Specifically, I argue for the merits of a more literal approach in theological and ecclesiastical contexts. But more importantly, I argue that there are linguistic weaknesses and limitations inherent in using a literal Bible translation strategy even in the theological realm. Finally, as an alternative, I argue for a mediating position that reflects the importance of having a more informed understanding of the nature of language, of the complex process of Bible translation, and of the various difficulties related to an overly literal approach to Bible translation.
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASV</td>
<td>American Standard Version</td>
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<td>GNB</td>
<td>Good News Bible (also TEV)</td>
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<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<td>LB</td>
<td>Living Bible: Paraphrased</td>
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<td>LXX</td>
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<td>MSG</td>
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<td>NET</td>
<td>New English Translation</td>
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<td>NIrV</td>
<td>New International Reader’s Version</td>
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<td>NKJV</td>
<td>New King James Version</td>
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<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
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<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
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<td>RL</td>
<td>Receptor Language (also Target Language)</td>
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<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
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<td>RV</td>
<td>Revised Version</td>
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<td>SL</td>
<td>Source Language</td>
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<td>TEV</td>
<td>Today’s English Version (also GNB)</td>
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Bible translation is a complex process. It involves at least two different languages. On the one hand, the source language of the text will be either Old Testament Hebrew, Aramaic, or New Testament Greek. On the other, the receptor language will, for our purposes, be English, although occasional reference will be made to translations into the radically different, non-Indo-European languages of the world. In translation theory, the biblical languages (as well as any other languages that are used as source texts for translation, such as the Old Testament Greek of the Septuagint or the Latin Vulgate) are called the source languages, abbreviated SL, and the language into which the text will be translated is called the receptor language, or RL.¹

Why is Bible translation considered a complex process? Isn’t translation concerned with words and with choosing the best fit for each word? Can’t translators simply look at the words in the SL, study their various meanings and nuances, and then go looking for the best matching words in the RL ad infinitum until the work is done? Why, then, should translation be viewed as a complex process?

The starting point for understanding the complexity and nature of Bible translation is in first recognizing that there are at least two different languages involved in the process. This doesn’t sound like rocket science, but consider this: Each language of the world’s more

¹ John Beekman and John Callow, Translating the Word of God, with Scripture and Topical Indexes (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 19-32.
than 7,000 languages is a unique collection of words and arrangements of words, called the language’s *lexicon* and *grammar*. These join together in various ways to form a unique means of communication. Because of this, no two languages are exactly alike. Their words are different, although there can be borrowed words from other languages that enter in and influence the lexicon in various ways. And the ways in which their words join together are different, too, although there are similar ways and patterns of constructing phrases, clauses, sentences, and so on.

To repeat, translation is a complex process, and it involves at least two different languages. And each of these languages has its own unique lexicon and grammar that come together to form a unique system of communication. That is, the unique words and word patterns in a language come together for the purpose of connecting people to one another. By God’s grace, humans have been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), and this means, among other things, that people have a built-in capacity to learn language at a remarkably early age and then use it productively throughout life either for good or for evil (Jas. 3:5-12). Because of this, each language is capable of development and change over time to suit the communication needs of mankind. No two languages are exactly alike, and no language remains static, either. The languages of the world are in a state of constant flux, with the addition of words and the shifting of word meanings in everyday use. This is part of the nature of language as it functions a means of human communication.

Again, Bible translation is a complex process because it involves at least two different languages. Language is used in human communication. The lexicons and grammars of each language are vehicles used for conveying thought and serving the purpose of human

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communication. Saying that languages have a lexicon and a grammar, though, only scratches the surface. Linguists recognize that languages operate on many different levels simultaneously. On the lower levels of language, sounds come together in various ways and patterns to form syllables and morphemes, the smallest meaningful units of words. On the middle levels, these building blocks combine to form words with many different functions and purposes. Words can be categorized based on their grammatical part of speech, a more traditional linguistic category that includes nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and the like. Or, words can be grouped by their underlying semantic class, whether they are “noun-like” objects or “verb-like” events, whether they are abstract words that modify other words or relational words that group and link other words together. In other words, not all words are created equal, and this goes for their content and function. On the higher levels, these different categories of words are arranged in recognizable phrase patterns, clauses, and sentences. And these, too, join together to combine in unique and meaningful ways. Word order is never random; it is always motivated by the speaker’s intention in communication as he or she uses and flaunts the known conventions of the particular language in question. And sentences combine to form paragraphs and discourses, the highest linguistic levels yet. Of course, these various linguistic levels don’t even touch upon the pragmatic function of language, including how implicit and explicit information is used with respect to contextual and background considerations, nor the cultural, social, historical, or religious factors that also greatly influence the complexity involved in translation.

Although languages are much more than a collection of words (i.e., their lexicon), the words we use are critical. Specifically, the words of a language are unique in their meanings.

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semantic ranges, and functions. To begin, words usually have a primary meaning. This is what a person thinks of first when a word comes to them in isolation, context excluded. But words can have more than one meaning or sense, and usually do. This is *polysemy*, the capacity of a single word to have multiple senses. Putting these various meanings together makes up a word’s *semantic range*. No one ever uses a word’s full semantic range at a given point in time. Rather, a single, specific sense is usually intended for each use of the word in its context.

Additionally, a word’s *function* refers to how it is used in relation to other words of a language. Words have natural allies, or other words that mean and function much like they do. They also have opposites of various kinds that can mean something much different. Each word also has a denotation, or a real-world referent it is pointing to, and a connotation, or the nuance that word has for a select group of people. These various properties of words are especially challenging in translation, because they don’t all carry across into other languages in the same ways. There are many things to consider when thinking of words in translation. The speakers of a language use this knowledge of words and word patterns intuitively to create a unique form of communication. Knowing how the language really works and functions, then, is an essential piece of understanding why Bible translation is a complex process.

Remember the theme of this thesis: Bible translation is a complex process that involves at least two different languages. At times in the process, words won’t match up so well between source and receptor languages. That’s an understatement, and it’s the nature of

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the beast. *Paraphrase* is the attempt to say something equivalent using different words.\(^5\) This is not an option in translation, but a necessity. But what are the proper limits of paraphrase? Should it be appealed to first and right away? Or, only as a last resort? How can it be used effectively without fear of misrepresenting the source text? Skilled speakers of a language know how to summarize or paraphrase a complex idea, making it relevant to their hearing audience. But more is involved when paraphrase is used in translation. It is the art of properly saying something equivalent while using different words when there isn’t an exact match of words and word properties across languages. Paraphrase is unavoidable as the Bible is translated into English, and even more so when translated into the non-Indo-European languages of the world that do not benefit from having a prolonged history with the Bible or even a shared cultural or historical background with the biblical world.

Another factor that makes the translation process difficult is understanding the significance of *word order*. Speakers use various word order combinations to structure what they are saying, to communicate more effectively with others, and to highlight what they are thinking.\(^6\) Word order is never random, but rather, it is chosen with very specific intentions in mind. Because of this, each language has its own ways of structuring information. The rules for how word order works and affects meaning need to be understood in both source and receptor languages alike. Misuse of word order in the RL can result in stylistically poor grammar, lack of meaning, or even wrong meaning and emphasis.

Linguistics is the science of language. Not everyone is a linguist or wants to become a linguist, but everyone uses language and has an opinion on how they think it works, whether

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their opinion is correct or incorrect. Since Bible translation is a complex process, it is important to understand and to contemplate how unique and complex languages really are. The SL and RL are sometimes radically divergent in a myriad of ways. Because each language has a unique lexicon and grammar, and these come together to form unique patterns of communication, it is important to consider, then, in what ways each language should be allowed to contribute to the translation process.

For instance, should the SL (in our case the biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) contribute both its lexical word meanings and its grammatical forms to the translation process? If so, how should the RL receive them? Should the formal patterns used in the SL determine what grammatical forms are used in the RL, even if it requires that a native speaker of the RL has to think using the patterns of the other language that is not his or her own? This would favor the SL too much. Or, should the lexicon and grammar of the RL be used in clear, natural, and recognizable ways for the benefit of the hearers of that language? And could this favor the RL too much? What are the limits? And abuses?

These are not simple questions to answer. Form, meaning, and context are the interrelated foundations of language. Nothing can be understood meaningfully in language without some kind of form and context. Because of this, some believe that to divorce meaning from form in translation leads to distortion. And yet, as expressed above, each language has its own ways of forming and arranging words together in meaningful patterns. To disregard this in the RL, causing the hearers to have to think according to the grammatical forms and word patterns found in the SL, may lead to an even worse kind of distortion.

Many Evangelical Christians in America tend to prefer more literal approaches to Bible translation rather than more idiomatic ones. Their preference for this can be quite
strong at times, with some even viewing those who prefer more idiomatic approaches as simply being in the wrong. Yet there are serious limitations to a literal Bible translation strategy and real benefits in recognizing the merits of a more idiomatic approach. In chapters 2 and 3, I will examine the biblical teaching and relevant discussions in church history associated with this issue. Then, in chapter 4, I will show how the various translation approaches impact theology. Specifically, I will argue for the merits of a more literal approach in theological and ecclesiastical contexts. But more importantly, I will argue that there are linguistic weaknesses and limitations inherent in using a literal Bible translation strategy even in the theological realm. Finally, as an alternative, I will argue for a mediating position that reflects the importance of having a more informed understanding of the nature of language, of the complex process of Bible translation, and of the various difficulties related to an overly literal approach to Bible translation.

**Literature Review**

Studying the various approaches to Bible translation can be a very personal matter. For this reason, this thesis will first establish a theoretical foundation for viewing the various approaches to translation by using Beekman’s and Callow’s standard, classic work on the subject, *Translating the Word of God, with Scripture and Topical Indexes*, 1974. The arguments for a more literal approach to translation will be taken from Leland Ryken’s *Understanding English Bible Translation: A Case for an Essentially Literal Approach*, 2009, where dialogue concerning the pros and cons of his arguments will also be given. The arguments against a more literal approach will be made from various linguistic resources concerning the nature of language, including the Beekman and Callow book mentioned...
CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL TEACHING

What does the Bible have to say about the complex process of Bible translation?

There really aren’t any whole passages that speak directly to this issue, but there are a few thoughts that can be gleaned from the Scriptures and productively applied to this situation. The passage where Jesus speaks about “jots and tittles,” the passage where Paul speaks about “prophecy and tongues,” and the passage where John writes about “adding to and taking away from Scriptures” all point to important thoughts concerning our understanding of the nature of language and the complex process of Bible translation.

Jots and Tittles

First consider the “jots and tittles” passage found at Matthew 5:17-20. The ESV translates these words “iota” and “dot,” respectively.¹ To begin, this passage is found within the lengthy Sermon on the Mount discourse, which runs from Matthew 5:1 to 7:29. Generally speaking, Jesus is establishing something like a “Christian constitution” for his disciples here. That is, he is stating the principles by which a member of the kingdom of heaven should live. Are these principles the same as those found in the Old Testament, which Jesus is using in new ways? Or, are they really novel concepts for his disciples? To put it another way, can one assume there is some degree of continuity or discontinuity in going from the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this thesis are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.
old covenant teachings to the new? Let’s keep this question in mind as we look at Jesus’ words in this passage:

17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

I think it is safe to say that Jesus is in some way upholding the importance of the Old Testament teaching here as it is represented by his use of the noun phrase, “the Law and the Prophets.” Specifically, in verse 17 he states that he has “not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.” Abolishing them would imply Jesus saw a discontinuity or break between the Old Testament teaching and his own, but fulfilling them implies he envisions a continuity of some kind. That is to say, Jesus is tying his ministry goals to doing, accomplishing, and fulfilling that which has already been written about him in the past. We also have a restatement of this same idea of continuity in verse 18, but using more colorful, emphatic language: “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

What is an “iota” and a “dot”? Or, a “jot and tittle” as the NKJV has it? In Greek, the words are ἰῶτα (iōta) and κεραία (keraia), respectively. According to the Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick Danker lexicon, the ἰῶτα is “the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet,” while the κεραία is a “projection, hook as part of a letter.” In this expression, then, Jesus seems interested in saying that, at the very least, the writings found in the Old Testament Scriptures

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3 Ibid., 108; “κεραία.”
are still important under the new covenant, so much so that the very smallest marking or detail shouldn’t be overlooked.

However, R. T. France says that if Jesus intends his disciples “to continue to obey all the commandments of the Torah . . . more meticulously than those Jews who had not followed Jesus,” then Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus is “out of step with the overall thrust of NT Christianity,” it is out of step with “the ceremonial aspects of the OT law, particularly its sacrificial provisions,” out of step with the letter to the Hebrews, and out of step with Paul’s attitude of “freedom from the law.”4 In other words, according to France, there appears to be a strong discontinuity with respect to the Law and the Prophets in Jesus’ teaching, too. That is to say, along with the continuity of Jesus upholding the Law and the Prophets as stated above, there also appears to be a strong discontinuity with respect to those aspects of the OT Law and Prophets that are uniquely fulfilled in and by him and that are not to be further applied to his disciples, at least not directly.

Consider an application of this passage to the complex process of Bible translation. If the Scriptures in the original languages are written using markings called “jots and tittles,” then what does that mean for the translator of the Scriptures into other languages? Jesus says these markings are still important and relevant to his disciples in that he hasn’t come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. They can’t be overlooked. But if the receptor language or RL doesn’t have “jots and tittles,” what is one to make of it? Is the translator required to find a way to incorporate the “jots and tittles” into the RL, foreign as they may be?

As has been established up to this point, Bible translation is a complex process that involves at least two different languages. In this example, the translator should determine

what meaningful function “jots and tittles” have in the Law and the Prophets, or the SL text, and then translate their significance into the RL. To balance the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity, the translator should maintain the meaning or significance of the SL “jots and tittles,” so as to not overlook the importance of them, but then let go of the actual or formal “jot and tittle” marking itself, since that would have no meaning for a reader or hearer in the RL language.

To press this odd example a little further, one could ask, doesn’t Jesus mean what he says? He has said that “jots and tittles” are important, and he also says that the least of these things written in the Law will not pass away until all has been accomplished. Certainly Jesus means what he says, but his meaning specifically refers to the preservation of certain forms found in the original languages. Thus the literal preservation of “jots and tittles” in translations is the wrong conclusion to draw. Jesus’ clear meaning is that attention should be given to even the smallest details of the holy writings of God as originally given. This pristine form is what should be preserved and not overlooked in translation.

For example, consider Matthew 5:18, where Jesus says, “until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law…” In Greek, the verb form παρέλθῃ (parelthē) is used twice here, which is translated as “pass away” and “will pass,” respectively. In both cases, it is a third person, aorist subjunctive verb form, recognizable by the iota subscript found underneath the final letter. What a small marking! In looking at various English versions of this word in its first instance, translators consistently use a temporal “until” clause with the English indicative verbs “pass away” (ESV, NASB, NKJV) and “disappear” (NIV, NLT), which are common translation strategies for this temporal Greek construction. For the second instance, indicative translations such as “will pass” (ESV,
NKJV), “shall pass” (NASB), and “will disappear” (NIV, NLT) are also common strategies for rendering this emphatic Greek construction. But the point is this: None of our English translations sees the need to retain a formal “iota” here. Translators regard equivalent constructions as sufficient for communicating what Jesus is quoted as having said. The meaning attached to the iota subscript has been retained using equivalent constructions in the RL, while the formal use of it has been let go, given that this is not a formal convention used in the English language.

Jesus’ use of the “jots and tittles,” then, serves to protect the complete contents of the original form of the Law and the Prophets. That is, it is not a prescriptive statement against the loss of formal attributes of the original text, but rather, that the hearer and translator alike would be sure to consider and include all the relevant components of meaning in their interpretation of the original biblical texts. In translation, this would ensure that the complete message would be communicated to all audiences, without loss of meaning, even if the formal “jots and tittles” were not retained in the RL.

**Prophecy and Tongues**

Next, consider the passage on prophecy and tongues found at 1 Corinthians 14:1-13. Following on the heels of the great “love chapter,” Paul continues his discussion of spiritual gifts from chapter twelve, making a specific comparison between speaking in tongues and prophesying:

1Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. 2For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. 3On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. 4The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds

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5 Jesus’ native language was likely Aramaic.
up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

6 Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? 7 If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? 8 And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? 9 So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. 10 There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, 11 but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. 12 So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

13 Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. Paul says quite clearly in verse 2 that the one who speaks in tongues “speaks not to men but to God,” and he adds that “no one understands him,” because they are mysteries “in the Spirit.” He contrasts this right away in verse 3 by saying that the one who prophesies does so “to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” Then, in verse 4, the full force of the contrasting purposes of these gifts is given: “The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.” Paul doesn’t disparage the use of tongues in these verses, but he does say that the gift of prophecy is greater than the gift of speaking in tongues, precisely because the people of God are encouraged through it. At the end of the paragraph in verse 5, though, Paul does say that speaking in tongues is equal to prophecy “if someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”

The second paragraph illustrates and builds on the idea of unintelligible speech by giving colorful commentary on the necessity of having interpretation for all sorts of instruments: flute, harp, bugle. Without distinct notes, people will not know what is played or will not get ready for battle (vv. 7-8). The argument is then brought back to speaking in tongues at verse 9 as Paul says in a similar fashion, “if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said?” This is a rhetorical question with the
implied response, “They won’t know what is said, because it is unintelligible.” Paul likens this to “speaking into the air.” Further, he compares this situation of unintelligible speech to the many languages of the world where, if someone does not “know the meaning of the language, [he] will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to [him]” (vv. 10-11). The upshot of all this is that if one is striving “to excel in building up the church” (v. 12), which is the higher goal of prophecy and a result of a proper love for others, then the “one who speaks in tongues” should seek proper understanding through interpretation (v. 13).

Gordon Fee contends that the overall concern in this passage is the edification of the people of God, while the specific issue Paul is addressing is the intelligibility of the message. He explains Paul’s logic as follows: If what is spoken in tongues is not understandable, then it cannot edify the church. But prophecy is addressed to people precisely for their edification. Therefore, in that sense, it is the greater gift. According to Fee, the real issue isn’t “the gift of speaking in tongues, per se, but uninterpreted tongues” (verse 13). He concludes by saying that “the edifying of oneself is not a bad thing; it simply is not the point of the community’s gathering for worship.”

Again, let us consider an application of this passage to the complex process of Bible translation. If the Scriptures in the original languages are written with the purpose of communicating the message of God to a people in a specific cultural context, doesn’t it stand to reason that an unintelligible translation in the RL wouldn’t be able to build people up as it did for those who understood the original message? Like speaking in tongues, only the ones who are “in the know” would have access to the message and would receive benefit from it. But on the other hand, if translation in the RL is understood by people, then they could be

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built up from it. Like speaking prophecies, the RL translation will speak to many people “for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation,” precisely because it has meaning and is understood by them.

On the one hand, meaning or intelligibility in translation is a non-negotiable part of the complex process. That is, without meaning being properly communicated, there is no hope for intelligibility or understanding. And without meaning and understanding, the translation in the RL has no value for the people that use that language. Maybe it has value as a magic word or religious symbol, but not as the life-transforming Word of God, which is what it is. For the Word to come with power (1 Thess. 1:2-10), it must be properly understood and acted upon. But on the other hand, as we have seen with the “jots and tittles” passage above, the formal aspects of translation, unlike meaning, are negotiable parts of the process. That is, one can dispense with some of the formal aspects of language, like iota subscripts, for the simple reason that they don’t exist in the receptor languages, at least not necessarily and in the exact same ways. Proper handling of forms in the SL, then, means that the corresponding linguistic conventions need to be sought out and used in the RL. In this way, the correct meaning of the SL’s formal conventions will be properly conveyed in the RL, and thus their meanings can be preserved.

Note that this is not the same as saying meaning is important and form is not, therefore one can focus on the one and dispense with the other. Rather, this is saying that meaning is non-negotiable in that unintelligible translation is not acceptable, but form may be handled differently from language to language. Form is dealt with as an aspect of meaning, in that the translator looks for the corresponding forms and structures in the RL that perform the
same functions and have the same meanings. The meaningful aspect of the SL forms are retained, albeit with the corresponding, meaningful forms found in the RL.

Adding To and Taking Away

Next, consider the passage concerning adding to and taking away from Scripture that is found at Revelation 22:18-19:

18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

This passage is found in the last part of the last chapter of Revelation and is functioning as a covenant curse formula over those who read the book. That is, according to Robert Mounce, just as covenant making in the ancient Near East contained warnings of this nature to protect the integrity of the covenant treaty, the apostle John also gives “a severe warning against adding to or taking away from its prophetic message.” Mounce goes on to say “it is addressed not to future scribes who might be tempted to tamper with the text . . . but to everyone who hears, that is, to members of the seven churches of Asia where the book was to be read aloud.” This adds divine authority to the book as a whole, causing the hearer to contemplate further the significance and relevance of these prophecies.

This passage also has an important application to the complex process of Bible translation. Specifically, it raises the question of what ways the addition of and subtraction of words from Scriptures should be a controlling principle for translation. Remember that Bible translation is a complex process that involves at least two different languages. A basic assumption of translation is that all the words in the original SL translation will necessarily

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be taken away and replaced with all the words that are added in the RL. If the curse formula of Revelation were forbidding this, translation of the Scriptures would either be impossible or there would be debris or residue from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages still floating around in RL translations.

What some people hear in the Revelation passage as it pertains to translation is this: Translation consists of a process where words in the SL are systematically replaced by equivalent words in the RL, so that by doing a simple calculation of the total words in both languages and comparing them, one can determine whether the translation is acceptable or not. Understood in this way, “adding to and taking away from Scriptures” makes translation out as an extremely literal, “one-for-one” substitution procedure. Yet because of the significant differences in the way languages express themselves, this is a gross caricature of the complex process of Bible translation. Where one language uses several words to say something, another might use only one, and vice-versa. This isn’t because translators are trying to circumvent the importance of this covenant curse, but rather, it is the nature of the complex process of Bible translation as it involves two or more different, sometimes very divergent languages.

For example, consider one of the shortest verses in the English NT, John 11:35. Most translations, including the ESV, use just two words, “Jesus wept.” The Greek original, however, has three: ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς. Have the translators violated the biblical admonition against addition and subtraction here? Although this is a simple example, the Scriptures are full of translation problems like this. Those who hold to a caricature of translation that says adding words and taking away words from Scriptures is wrong fail to recognize the complex nature of the Bible translation task, in that it involves two or more
different languages that don’t always use the same number of words to complete the same form plus meaning tasks in a given context. Specifically for our example, Greek often uses articles before proper nouns where English does not. This is a necessary adjustment in English translations every time it comes up.

The covenant curse formula, then, serves to protect the complete contents of the original form of the revelation. That is, it is not an injunction against translators or translation, but rather, that the hearer and translator alike would be sure to not add to or take away from the original meaning of the revelation. In translation, this would ensure that the complete message would be communicated to all audiences, nothing more and nothing less. Just as the original covenant of life with Adam threatened death for disobedience, so, too, the covenant curse formula threatens plagues and loss of one’s reward in the case of disobedience to the word and revelation of God.

Though there aren’t entire passages that speak directly to the issue of Bible translation or how the process should be carried out, the three examples discussed in this chapter have great value in helping us to construct a proper view of our understanding of the nature of language and the complex process of Bible translation. Each of these ideas will be addressed further in the sections to come.

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8 Daniel Wallace, “Fifteen Myths about Bible Translation,” https://danielbwallace.com/2012/10/08/fifteen-myths-about-bible-translation (accessed April 1, 2016). In this article, Wallace says the Greek NT has from 138,000 to 140,000 words, depending on the edition used, but each of the English translations cited, literal and idiomatic alike, has more than 173,000 words in the NT.
CHAPTER 3
CHURCH HISTORY

What does church history have to say about the complex process of Bible translation? According to Bruce Metzger, there have been four major periods in the history of Bible translation: The first period includes translation into the dominant languages of the ancient world (especially the Greek Septuagint, the Jewish Targums in Aramaic, and the Latin Vulgate); the second period includes the dominant languages of the Reformation, “when renderings were no longer made from the Latin Vulgate translation but from the original Hebrew and Greek text into the vernaculars of Europe” (especially the translation of the Bible into English); the third period includes the non-dominant vernacular languages of the world, or what he calls “the great missionary endeavor” (i.e., the dominant and non-dominant language translations in the developing world of which “there was previously often not even an alphabet”); and the fourth period continues the third, but includes translations where national speakers assume a larger responsibility for the task, and expatriate linguists and translators serve them as consultants.¹

Interestingly, although this historical framework is constructed on a simple pattern of movement from the dominant spoken language centers of the world to the less dominant ones, the movement itself is remarkably inconsistent with respect to the type of approach the translations took in each of these historical periods. Neither a literal nor an idiomatic

approach to Bible translation dominated in any of these periods, and there was no real progression from one to the other. This began to change in the third and the fourth historical periods, but even then, when the understanding of the nature of language grew and idiomatic translations flourished among non-Indo-European languages of the world, there has been a strong reaction to this movement. This is felt most in the English speaking world, and it has resulted in a resurgence of “linguistic conservatism,” or a renewed interest in interpreting the Bible more “accurately.” All to say, both literal and idiomatic approaches to translation are alive and well today, as they are represented in both the academic and the popular, laity strata of society.

Translation in the Ancient World

Using Metzger’s historical outline, consider first the translation of the Bible into the dominant languages of the ancient world. The oldest translation of the Scriptures is the Septuagint, which is taken from the Latin se\textit{ptuaginta} and means “seventy.” It is often designated by the Roman numerals LXX in reference to the seventy scholars who worked on the translation of the Hebrew OT into Greek during the time of Ptolemy II (285-246 BC). Metzger describes the language used in this translation as the common, vernacular Greek found in Egypt at the time, while the individual books in the LXX vary with respect to using either a literal or idiomatic approach to translation. According to Metzger, the LXX is important in antiquity because “it was the medium through which the religious ideas of the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Metzger, 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 17.
\end{itemize}
Hebrews were brought to the attention of the world,” and as such, “it was the Bible of the early Christian church.” Interestingly, he adds, “when the Bible is quoted in the New Testament, it is almost always from the Septuagint version.” As a result, the language of the NT itself has been greatly influenced by the translation of the LXX. By the end of the first century, because there were very few Christians left with any understanding of the Hebrew language, the Hebrew Scriptures fell out of use and the LXX became the church’s main source for the OT Scriptures.

Over time, with all Scripture copies being made by the hands of men, the LXX became corrupted and unreliable. Origen attempted to purify the text by first collecting all the extant Greek manuscripts of the OT that he could find, and then by arranging his work in six parallel columns so that he could systematically reconstruct how the Hebrew text relates to several Greek versions of the OT, including the LXX translation. According to Metzger, Origin included translations that reflected literal as well as idiomatic approaches in various columns of this massive work, called the Hexapla, so that he might capture the full sense of the meaning, desiring to include both approaches in his analysis. In other words, he used a “both-and” approach in his studies, not an “either-or” one, to be sure.

Because of the loss of the Hebrew language among the Jewish people after AD 70, there was a need for a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in Aramaic. Enter the Jewish Targums. These interpretations of the OT were initially paraphrases of the original text, but then later developed into more detailed explanations and interpretations. The variously

5 Ibid., 18.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 19.
8 Ibid., 20.
produced Targums (i.e., in Palestine and Babylonia) were not considered “official,” in that their text never had a fixed form, and their approach to translation ranges all the way from literalistic to paraphrastic, while incorporating a wide variety of the kinds of explanatory comments. Metzger sums up this translation strategy by stating that “all translations of the Bible are necessarily interpretive to some extent, but the Targums differ in that they are interpretive as a matter of policy and often to an extent that far exceeds the bounds of translation or even paraphrase.”

In order to round out a look at the translation of Scriptures into the dominant languages of the ancient world, consider the history of the Latin Vulgate. Latin, of course, was the *lingua franca* of Western civilization for more than a thousand years, so it is no wonder a translation of Scriptures into the Latin language would have a prominent place. But it was slow in coming. The Old Latin versions varied in quality, since the scribes at the time “allowed themselves considerable freedom in incorporating their own and others’ traditions.” Metzger also says “the pre-Jerome translations in general lack polish and are often painfully literal.” Such was the state of translation at the time.

However, in AD 383, the Catholic Pontiff, Pope Damasus, asked Jerome to make a revised translation of the Bible that was in use at Rome. His initial response was to decline the Pope’s offer, primarily because of the unfavorable position it would put him in. But he eventually acquiesced, not only because it was the Pope himself who was asking, but also because of the wide range of quality and diversity that existed among the Old Latin

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9 Ibid., 21.
10 Ibid., 24.
11 Ibid., 30.
12 Ibid., 31.
manuscripts. Jerome had commented on this himself, saying there were “almost as many forms of the text as there are manuscripts.”\textsuperscript{13}

It is important to note that, although the efforts of Jerome resulted in the Latin Vulgate translation, a text that unified the variations found in the Old Latin manuscripts and served as a basis for pre-Reformation vernacular translations of Scripture, nonetheless, it was “far from being a uniform piece of work throughout.”\textsuperscript{14} In fact, Jerome was much more comfortable using biblical Hebrew than he was with the Greek of the NT or of the classics. Because of this, his work in various parts of Scripture reflects a difference in both care and quality commensurate with his giftings. For example, the Gospels were finished within a year, while the Psalms and other portions of the OT were translated and revised over a period of fifteen years.\textsuperscript{15} Despite all this, the Latin Vulgate became the most important translation of the Bible in Western Europe for nearly a thousand years.

Translation around the Time of the Reformation

Next, consider the translations of the Bible done around the time of the Reformation, focusing especially on the English language versions. The first such translation was done in the late 1300’s by John Wycliffe, who has been appropriately called “the Morning Star of the Reformation” for his strong views regarding the importance of biblical authority and vernacular Bible translation.\textsuperscript{16} Because of the corruption of the papacy at the time, Wycliffe saw and felt the need for having the Bible as sole authority in matters of one’s life and faith.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
But it is precisely because of his belief in the sole authority of Scripture that he also saw the need for having the Bible translated into the vernacular languages. These thoughts and beliefs eventually became hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation.

Interestingly, Wycliffe based his English translation on the Latin Vulgate, since Latin was still the *lingua franca* of the Catholic church and theology at the time, and the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, along with the first publications of the original Hebrew and Greek biblical source texts, had yet to occur. Two separate translations are recognized as having been done under the direction of John Wycliffe: “The Wycliffe Version,” or early version, was extremely literal. According to Donald Brake, “Latin word order was maintained at the expense of clear meaning and natural English word order. It made the Old Testament awkward and even inaccurate in places.” For this reason, the second edition, called “Purvey’s Revision,” or later version, was much more free with English idiom throughout, and so was much more readily accepted. In comparison, Brake adds that “it abandoned much of the wooden literalness of the Wycliffe version.”

There is reason to believe that the literal approach to translation used in Wycliffe’s early version may have been due to the tumultuous times in which he lived. That is, in not wanting to further alienate himself from the established Roman Catholic church, it may have been expedient to make his translation as literal as possible using the Latin Vulgate, the church’s recognized text, much like other legal and ecclesiastical documents of the time were translated. Yet, the later version seems to coalesce with Wycliffe’s belief that the Scriptures, the sole authority for one’s faith and life, should be understood by the common man. Translation into the vernacular, then, was a means for attaining to this belief. Brake adds that

17 Ibid., 57.
18 Ibid.
“this revised English Bible was directed at a very much wider and less learned public than the professional or even royal audiences of the earlier text.”

The next notable English translation was the version of the New Testament done by William Tyndale in 1526, with revisions and a full Bible in 1534 and 1535. His translation is the first one in English based entirely on the biblical texts in their original languages, rather than on a translation like the Latin Vulgate. The invention of the Gutenberg press in 1456 made editions of both the Hebrew OT, in 1488, and Erasmus’ Greek NT, in 1516, widely available. Tyndale’s studies at Oxford satisfied his continued interest in studying the biblical languages by providing him with the most recent scholarship available to him at the time.

Tyndale’s translation work didn’t follow the grammatical literalness of the earlier Wycliffe version, as he himself was especially “gifted in the use of the English language both in expression of the simple Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and his use of syntax.” As Metzger describes it, Tyndale’s translation is marked by being “free, bold, and idiomatic.” He also adds that “its simplicity and directness mark the work as a truly great achievement in literature.” One of Tyndale’s most famous exclamations about Bible translation also describes his desire to translate meaningfully rather than woodenly or too literally, vowing that “if God spared him life, ere many years, he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than the pope did.”

19 Ibid., 62.
20 Ibid., 102.
21 Metzger, 59.
22 Ibid., 60.
23 Brake, 95.
Tyndale’s translation work is important, though, not only because it was based on the biblical texts in the original languages, but because of the influence it has had on so many translations since then. Fee and Strauss say that the Tyndale translation served as the basis for almost all English translation work up to the twentieth century, including the King James Version, “which is estimated to be ninety percent Tyndale.”

Metzger likewise commends the Tyndale translation, stating that “it became, in fact, a foundation for all subsequent efforts of revision, so much so that 80 percent or more of the English Bible down through the Revised Version has been estimated to be his.”

The next English translation to note is the King James Version (KJV), first published in 1611. Unlike the previously mentioned translations, this work was done by committee, not an individual, according to a list of standard rules and procedures. It was not a completely new translation but based upon the Bishop’s Bible of 1568, and “as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.” Other translations were also consulted. The work was endorsed by King James himself, making it the next “Authorized Version,” (after the Great Bible of 1539 and the Bishop’s Bible), thus showing the king’s desire for unity in religious matters, albeit achieved only through compromise between Catholic and Protestant points of view. Because of this, the marginal notes were kept to a minimum, used only “for necessary explanation of Hebrew or Greek words.” This avoided using any of the controversial,

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25 Metzger, 60.

26 Ibid., 71.

27 Ibid.
theological marginal notes that were found in most of the previous English Bible translations.\textsuperscript{28}

Several comments are in order with respect to the approach to translation used in the KJV. Most scholars today would consider the KJV to be a very literal translation of the Scriptures. However, in “The Translators to the Reader,” one of the introductory prefaces to the original work, Miles Smith justifies the translators’ use of marginal notes in order to explain various word choices the translators made when multiple possibilities existed. This reflects their policy regarding \textit{polysemy}. Smith also justifies the translators’ deliberate choice not to render repeated Hebrew and Greek words consistently, preferring to make a virtue of freely using synonyms and the full range of the English language. This reflects their policy regarding \textit{concordance}.\textsuperscript{29} Note, however, that these ways of resolving polysemy and concordance policy issues are not usually associated with a literal translation approach. But because of how well the translation was done, these kinds of decisions helped to positively shape the English language for nearly 400 years.

A major weakness with the KJV, though, has to do with the source documents that the translation was based upon. At the time, “there was no standard Hebrew Masoretic text of the OT,” and Erasmus’s Greek NT, which came to be referred to as the \textit{Textus Receptus}, or “received text,” was based on manuscripts that most scholars today consider to be of inferior quality. But there was nothing better available at the time.\textsuperscript{30} Over the years, this weakness has become more apparent, and so newer translations of the Bible have been based on more

\textsuperscript{28} Fee and Strauss, 138.

\textsuperscript{29} Jeremy Thomas, “The Translators to the Reader: What the KJV Translators Themselves Had to Say about Their Work.” \textit{The Testimony} 81 (2011): 155-159.

\textsuperscript{30} Metzger, 77.
recent and reliable scholarship. Despite this, the New King James Version, a revision of the KJV completed in 1982, continues to use the *Textus Receptus* as a Greek source text for translation, although differences between the Textus Receptus, sometimes referred to as the Majority Text, and the Novum Testamentum Graece,\(^{31}\) the text most used by scholars today, are noted.

The KJV enjoyed many years of success in the English-speaking world. In 1830, though, a new age of textual criticism had dawned. Many scholars turned from the *Textus Receptus* and began collecting, analyzing, and organizing textual evidence with the goal of better establishing the original Greek source text, or at least a text as close to the original text as current textual scholarship would allow. Although there were others, Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, two prominent Anglican scholars, produced a Greek NT text with apparatus and notes in 1881 that was subsequently used as the basis for the Revised Version of the NT (RV).\(^{32}\)

**Translation in Modern Times**

Metzger’s next historical period of Bible translation consists of all the translations that have been made into the non-dominant vernacular languages of the world. Although our focus will remain on the English translations during this time, it is important to recognize that the advances in biblical scholarship, including textual criticism, Bible translation philosophy, linguistics, and missiology, have greatly influenced how Bible translation has come to be understood in the English speaking world.

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As noted above, the Revised Version NT was completed in 1881 and the OT in 1885. Closely on its heels, the American Standard Version (ASV) was completed in 1901, which was basically an adaptation of the RV, incorporating about 600 changes specifically for American audiences. The RV translation itself was a necessary revision of the KJV, due to the many changes that had occurred over the years in the English language and due to the textual concerns related to the biblical source texts. It was based on the Hebrew Masoretic text and the newly completed Westcott-Hort Greek text. But because it was a revision of the beloved KJV, the changes that were made were kept to a minimum, and only with a two-thirds majority for a change in the text, and a simple majority for a change in a marginal note. According to Fee and Strauss, “the end result was a translation based on a superior Greek text, but one that many people considered to be quite inferior to the KJV in terms of English literary quality.” Charles Spurgeon commented that the Revised NT was “strong in Greek, weak in English,” an obvious slight to the committee’s overly literal translation approach and policies.

In 1895, German Protestant scholar Gustav Adolf Deissmann published a work called “Bible Studies” (Bibelstudien), which had a profound impact on the approaches used in Bible translation. He had researched recently discovered, 2,000-year-old Egyptian papyrus scraps that contained a form of the Greek language that was very much like the Greek of the NT. He concluded that the Greek of the NT was written in the common language of the day, or what we call Koiné Greek (from Greek κοινός, [koinos]meaning “common”). Bible translators since that time have adopted the idea that translations should also use language that the

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33 Metzger, 100.
34 Fee and Strauss, 140.
35 Metzger, 104.
common man can comprehend, given Deissmann’s information about how the original NT texts were written.36

The finding of Deissmann, then, has led to numerous translations being made using an idiomatic rather than a literal translation approach. They focus more on a clear and natural use of the RL as well as on the reader’s or hearer’s comprehension. The terms colloquial, standard, or common-language describe this type of approach to translation. They are characterized by being easy to read and easy to listen to. Although many translations before this time had leanings in this direction, a solid basis could now be given for choosing to use vocabulary and sentence constructions that the common man could understand. The most widely known translations in the twentieth century that use this approach are the Good News Bible (GNB), also known as Today’s English Version (TEV), first published in 1976; the Contemporary English Version (CEV) in 1995; the New Living Translation (NLT) in 1996, 2004, and 2007; and the New International Reader’s Version (NIV) in 1996. Bibles like The New Testament in Modern English, translated by J. B. Phillips (Phillips) in 1958, revised 1972, The Living Bible (LB) in 1971, and The Message (MSG) in 2002, also use a translation approach that focuses more on meaning, but many consider these to be paraphrases rather than translations.37

But just as enthusiasm for an idiomatic approach to Bible translation has grown, so has zeal for guarding a more literal approach to translation. Literal translations, of course, focus more on maintaining an accurate rendering of the SL text, which includes concern for both lexical and grammatical choices. The terms essentially literal and word-for-word are

36 Daniel Wallace, “Why so Many Versions?” https://bible.org/article/why-so-many-versions (accessed April 1, 2016). In this article, Wallace stresses the point that modern, idiomatic translations use language the common man can comprehend, precisely because that’s how they believe the original texts were also written.

37 Metzger, 163-185.
used to describe this type of translation approach. And again, many Bible translations in history have followed this kind of strategy. In English, the KJV translation is the standard for literal translations. The RV and the ASV were both revisions of the KJV, which itself was a revision of the Bishop’s Bible, which had its roots go all the way back to the Tyndale translation. Newer English translations that follow the literal tradition of the RV are the Revised Standard Version (RSV) in 1952; the New American Standard Bible (NASB) in 1971 and 1995; the New King James Version (NKJV) in 1982; the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) in 1989; and the English Standard Version (ESV) in 2001 and 2011. One of the benefits of these versions is that, while they maintain a literal approach to translation that focuses on the lexicon and grammar of the SL, they have been able to update the English vocabulary of the RL used in them (especially the “thees” and “thous” of the KJV).

It seems inevitable, then, that such a divergence in approaches to translation would create space for a compromise solution. That is, with attention being given to SL accuracy in the literal camp, and with attention given to RL clarity and naturalness in the idiomatic camp, it is no wonder that a mediating position would enter in and, at least for a time, win the day. The New International Version (NIV) in 1978 and 1984, also known as Today’s New International Version (TNIV) in 2005 and as the updated NIV again in 2011, pioneered the “thought-for-thought” approach to Bible translation. On the one hand, the translators of the NIV express their high view of Scripture in the preface, stating they are committed to “the full authority and complete trustworthiness of the Scriptures, which they believe to be God’s Word in written form.”38 This stance would find broad acceptance among evangelicals, but it is especially attractive to those who desire to protect accuracy in translation as a high priority. On the other hand, the NIV is very readable, being “more colloquial than the

38 Ibid., 140.
Revised Standard Version, less free than the New English Bible, and more literary than the Good News Bible.” 39 Again, a stance that finds broad acceptance among evangelicals, but is especially attractive to those who desire to protect naturalness and clarity as a high priority. Fee and Strauss comment on this by stating “the NIV’s popularity was due in part to its finding a niche between the formal and functional equivalent versions available at the time. The NIV was clear and readable, yet still close enough to the rhythm and cadence of the KJV to sound like the real Bible (that is, the KJV!)” 40

In sum, there has been a simple pattern of movement from the dominant spoken language centers of the world to the less dominant ones during the history of Bible translation. However, the movement itself has been remarkably inconsistent with respect to the type of approach the translations took in each of the historical periods. Neither a literal nor an idiomatic approach to Bible translation has dominated in any of these periods, and there was no real progression from one to the other, either. In the third and the fourth historical periods, this began to change. There has been a great growth in the understanding of the nature of language, and because of this, the idiomatic approach to translation has flourished, especially among non-Indo-European languages of the world. But there has also been a strong reaction to this movement in the English speaking world. All to say, the presence of both literal and idiomatic approaches to translation continue to be felt in the church today.

39 Ibid., 141.

40 Fee and Strauss, 149.
CHAPTER 4
THEOLOGY

General Theology and the Nature of Language

What does theology have to say about the complex process of Bible translation? To begin, consider again the importance of man being created in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:26-27). John Calvin says the image of God in man consists primarily of the original integrity of man’s nature, revealed in true knowledge, righteousness and holiness. Specifically, “the image of God extends to everything in which the nature of man surpasses that of all other species of animals,”¹ and this includes, among other things, the capacity to think, reason, and use human language as a means of communication. Human language, then, is an integral part of man’s nature, or “who he is” as God has created him.

Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva, in their *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, call attention to Calvin’s views of man as it concerns learning, the humanities, and common grace.² On the one hand, Calvin says, “But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance, for it we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths.”³ His view of man with respect to studies in

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³ Calvin, 275.
the humanities is positive, and very much in line with the Renaissance thinking at the time. On the other hand, he adds, “But lest anyone think a man truly blessed when he is credited with possessing great power to comprehend truth under the elements of this world, we should at once add that all this capacity to understand, with the understanding that follows upon it, is an unstable and transitory thing in God’s sight, when a solid foundation of truth does not underlie it.” Here, his view of man with respect to his learning in the humanities is more negative, if it is not accompanied by a solid, biblical foundation. Silva notes that “it is essential to appreciate Calvin’s balance here.” His understanding of human learning has both an appreciation for it as “a divine gift” and also a caution for it because of “its basic instability” and “the fallen and perverted mind of the sinner.” This recognition of the merits and limitations of human learning within a context of common grace points to the necessity of including a solid, biblical foundation in our pursuit of truth.

The upshot of this is that there is much to be learned concerning the nature of language and the complex process of Bible translation from both Christian and non-Christian academic sources. The key, as Calvin has noted and Silva has brought to our attention, is that careful study and thoughtful reflection, prayerfully and biblically considered, must accompany our pursuit of learning in the humanities.

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4 Ibid.
5 Kaiser and Silva, 300.
6 Ibid., 303.
Various Approaches to Bible Translation

John Beekman and John Callow begin their first chapter of *Translating the Word of God* with an explanation of the translation process. They say that it involves at least two languages and a message. They add that the two essential components of a translation are its form and its meaning. The form of a language is described by its sounds, words, and grammar, while the meaning is the message that is communicated through its forms. They comment on this by first stating that “all translators are agreed that their task is to communicate the meaning of the original.” That is, regardless of approach to translation, all translators understand that the process of Bible translation necessarily involves the transfer of meaning from the SL to the RL. However, there is discussion, if not open disagreement, concerning the importance of linguistic forms. That is, while some believe that the meaning of the original source texts is best communicated by translating into a linguistic form that closely parallels the forms used in the original SL, others believe that the meaning of the original source text is best communicated by translating into the natural forms used in the RL. As for approaches to translation, they say translations that place an emphasis on retaining SL forms in the RL are classified as “literal” translations, but translations that allow

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7 John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God, with Scripture and Topical Indexes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 19-32. Those who work in Bible translation organizations like Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International have many years of accumulated experience in their respective fields of study, whether it be in linguistics, translation, or other academic disciplines. At the time of writing, the authors of *Translating the Word of God* have over twenty years of experience working in NT translation and as consultants checking work for minority groups in different parts of the world. This includes much time teaching and giving lectures in many different countries. Thus, if our goal really is to find out truth about the nature of languages and the complex process of Bible translation, it would be hard to find a comparably rich and vast array of experiences from which to draw.

8 Ibid., 19.

9 Ibid., 20.
for the RL forms to be chosen based on meaning, “whether this parallels the form of the original or not,” are classified as “idiomatic” translations.\textsuperscript{10}

At this point, note how unfortunate it is that we have such a strong, dichotomous view of the different approaches to translation. It is not unfortunate because it is untrue. Beekman’s and Callow’s definitions and descriptions of form, meaning, and approach to translation are accurate and quite good. It is unfortunate because this is the black-and-white caricature many of us carry around about how the complex process of Bible translation actually works. The authors themselves immediately acknowledge this in their text by stating that “there are few, if any, translations that are completely literal or completely idiomatic, each has been produced with one or the other approach in mind.”\textsuperscript{11} I’m not sure I fully agree that “each has been produced with the other approach in mind,” but I would strongly contend that no translations are completely literal (except an interlinear translation, perhaps) or completely idiomatic, and each approach to translation necessarily encroaches on the other approach at various points, depending on the complexities at hand.

For example, a literal translation may render an SL word collocation in a rather meaningful way in the RL, thus showing an awareness of the need for clarity and naturalness, because it is advantageous to do so. Likewise, an idiomatic translation may very well state some description or activity in a rather literal, direct sort of way, matching both forms and meaning of the SL text in the RL, if it is both possible and advantageous to do. The upshot, and an underlying tenet in this thesis, is this: The complex process of Bible translation can

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. I recognize that Bible translation theory has progressed far beyond the labels of literal versus idiomatic, also known as meaning-based, dynamic equivalence, and functional equivalence, to more full-blown language and communication theories like relevance theory, Skopostheorie, and so on. However, since the purpose of this thesis is to explore the literal and mediating approaches, it is still useful and helpful to compare terms at this level of the discussion.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 21.
only be reduced to a black-and-white caricature of it in the most basic situations. In most cases, the complexities of translation make the process much more difficult than simply having a two-category, literal versus idiomatic approach.

Beekman and Callow go on to give a continuum of approaches to translation based on the polarity of literal versus idiomatic, which includes highly literal and modified literal translations on one end and idiomatic and unduly free translations on the other (Figure 1 below.) Interestingly and importantly, they categorize the extreme ends of the translation continuum as being unacceptable translation approaches, while they categorize the more moderate versions of each approach as acceptable.

---X------------- unacceptable types -------------X-----
---X-- acceptable types ---X--
highly literal modified literal idiomatic unduly free

Fig. 1. Four types of translations. These four types represent a continuum from one extreme to another, with acceptable types of translation for general use lying between the extremes.

The highly literal type is unacceptable because the linguistic forms and word order of the SL override the RL too much, and “the result is a translation that doesn’t adequately communicate the message to a reader who does not know the original language or who does not have access to commentaries or other reference works to explain it to him.” In other words, the SL forms used in the RL get in the way of properly communicating RL meaning, making the translation unacceptable for general use. Likewise, the unduly free type is unacceptable because the lack of controls over meaning in the RL can lead to a loss of

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factual, historical, or even cultural trustworthiness with respect to the SL text. They say this approach leads to a “distortion of content, with the translation clearly saying what the original neither says nor implies.” Consequently, there are two acceptable approaches to translation left at the center of the continuum: modified literal and idiomatic. According to Beekman and Callow, these two approaches represent acceptable means of maintaining meaning in translation across languages, while each has a separate emphasis or focus on how strongly the forms of the source text should influence which RL forms are translated and used.

Languages, by their very nature, are systems of recognizable sounds and word patterns. If this were not so, it wouldn’t be possible to learn another language. Linguists study these various systematic patterns at various levels of language: sounds, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, discourses, and so on. That is, there aren’t just these language components floating around independently, but rather, the whole system is hierarchically related at different levels, top to bottom, like a corporate organizational chart, where each level serves the other levels by having multiple purposes simultaneously. And again, we really couldn’t learn another language if they weren’t highly structured like this.

But, this is only true up to a point. As anyone learning a second language has discovered, the rules describing how the language is constructed seem to have many exceptions. Why? Because languages are combinations of conventions and exceptions. It’s the nature of language. A large part of any language seems to follow the system of hierarchical relations quite nicely, but a smaller part of it doesn’t seem to work that way at all, or worse yet, it seems to follow different or even contrasting patterns that aren’t as easily described by a simple rule. And this occurs on all levels of language, including sounds,

14 Ibid., 23.
words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, discourses, and so on. That’s really the convention and exception bind, or the nature of language. In thinking about approaches to translation, then, it is important to recognize how our understanding of the nature of language, that is, its regularity and irregularities, will affect the understanding we have of the translation process. Again, language doesn’t always follow a simple set of rules, and this needs to be factored into our approach to translation.

A question that often comes up with respect to different translations is this: “Of all the translations out there, which one is best?” This is really another form of asking “Which of the approaches to translation is best?” It is important to add at this point that all four of the approaches to translation by Beekman and Callow are valid and have their place, if they are properly understood. For instance, a highly literal translation, such as an interlinear, is useful for seeing the source text along with a translated gloss for each word. It might not be useful to read aloud in church, but it is useful for studying the biblical languages in a word-for-word manner. A modified literal translation is useful for giving a transparent view of the text that underlies it. By keeping SL forms integrated into the RL translation, this approach gives the feel and rhythm of the biblical languages not found in the idiomatic translations. Modified literal translations also do a great job at helping readers to keep track of concordant key terms throughout Scripture by translating them as consistently as possible, which is important for theological, historical, and literary allusions. And, they tend to use a more consistent and predictable vocabulary overall. An idiomatic translation, on the other hand, is useful for giving the meaning or gist of what Scripture is trying to say without being encumbered by the

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demands of formal correspondence. They also do a good job of relaying the emotional impact that the original readers and hearers may have had.

Note that idiomatic approaches to translation are most often promoted among unchurched audiences and in cross-cultural mission contexts. Because of their lack of familiarity with the biblical culture and context, biblically untrained readers find idiomatic translations more accessible. A free translation is also useful for helping us to think outside the box, especially with respect to rendering words and phrases in other contexts, historical or contemporary, which may give insights we would not have had otherwise.

Because each of the four approaches to translation has value, when the question, “What is the best translation?” comes up, the best response might be to ask another question: “What will the translation be used for?” In this way, one is able to determine which of the various approaches to translation is best suited for the specific context or task at hand.

What are the Merits of a Literal Approach?

On the literal side of the continuum of approaches to translation described by Beekman and Callow, it is the modified literal approach that concerns us. Anything to the left of this on the continuum, although useful in certain contexts, is not useful with respect to communicating the meaning of the text message to the reader using language that is understandable. Therefore, it is to the modified literal translation approach that we now turn.

I believe it is safe to assume that those who are in favor of an “essentially literal” translation are talking about something similar to Beekman’s and Callow’s modified literal approach. Leland Ryken has pointed this out, saying that “essentially literal does not mean totally literal.” He adds:
It means that a translation strives to find the English word or combination of words that most accurately corresponds to the words of the original text. It does not mean translating the original in a way that makes no sense in English. Furthermore, retaining the syntax of the original, though not an irrelevant consideration, is nonetheless not a high priority, inasmuch as Hebrew and Greek syntax is so different from English syntax.¹⁶

Notice the two elements that he includes in this description of essentially literal translations: accuracy is measured by the word correspondence between SL text and RL translation, and syntax in the SL is a consideration, but it does not ultimately govern the syntactical choices made in the RL. To me, this sums up well the hybrid designation of being both “literal” as a primary concern, but also “modified” where necessary. However, with respect to literal translations in general, I do question the accuracy of his allegation that “retaining the syntax of the original, though not an irrelevant consideration, is nonetheless not a high priority.” To me, literal translation approaches are, by definition, concerned with formal correspondence, and although the modified literal approach has less concern for it than a highly literal approach does, it is an important concern nonetheless. Wayne Grudem also comments on essentially literal translations:

Sometimes essentially literal translations are called “formal equivalence” translations, suggesting that they try as far as possible to preserve the “form” of the original language in translation. I do not generally use the phrase “formal equivalence” nor do I think it is a useful phrase for describing essentially literal translations. The reason is that the word “form” places too much emphasis on reproducing the exact word order of the original language, something that just makes for awkward translation and really has very little to do with the goal of translating the meaning of every word in the original.¹⁷

Though their terminology differs from Beekman and Callow, both Ryken and Grudem are appealing to a modified literal approach to translation, and I think their view of it falls safely within that tradition.

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.
¹⁷ Ibid., 20.
Note, however, that the editors of the ESV, who describe their approach as essentially literal, are a bit more hesitant about this when they say in the Preface to that version, “we have sought to be as literal as possible, while maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence.” Nevertheless, they all are upholding a modified literal translation approach. On the one hand, Ryken and Grudem are more flexible with respect to their reasons for and the necessity of allowing formal modifications in translation, while on the other, the ESV is less transparent about this, but also recognizes the necessity for formal modifications.

What, then, are the merits of this modified literal approach? The merits are precisely what their definition states, namely, that there is a focus given to the accuracy of words and word correspondence between SL and RL texts. Their focus is on words, and words are critical in the development of a theological understanding of Scripture. In *Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach*, Ryken gives three reasons why he believes an essentially literal approach has merit, all of which emphasize what is retained by this focus on words: 1) fullness of language, 2) transparency of the original languages, and 3) the literary qualities of the Bible. That is, an essentially literal approach has merit because the attention given to words leads to a strong lexical relationship between the source text and the receptor translation, thereby producing a full, rich, and consistent theological vocabulary, while retaining a transparent link with formal aspects of the source text and the receptor translation at the same time. These ideas will be taken up in the sections that follow.

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Key Terms

God’s Word, which is a message from a holy God to His sinful creation, contains a message of salvation through faith in the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Because of this, there are necessarily some words in Scripture that are more important to the thrust of the message than other words. These certain words can be unusual or ordinary words, but over time, they come to have distinct religious and theological value. They help to move the central message of the gospel forward by creating a coherence, or unity of message, throughout the Scriptures. Bible translators often call these theological words “key terms” because of their special significance within the story of salvation.

Ryken’s first point above is that a fullness of language is achieved when the focus in translation remains on the individual words. On the flip side, his worry is that anything less than this will result in a reduction of some kind. In his view, there are two good reasons for keeping the fullness of language. First, he says “the substitutes are almost always reductionistic.” He cites John 2:2 as an example, which states that Christ is “the propitiation for our sins” (ESV, NASB, NKJV). According to Ryken, the Greek word ἱλασμός (hilasmos), translated propitiation in the ESV, means “to appease anger through the offering of a sacrifice,” but none of the dynamic equivalent substitutions encompass the same fullness of language for that word. Idiomatic translations use equivalents such as “atoning sacrifice” (NRSV, NIV), “the sacrifice that atones” (NLT), “the sacrifice” (CEV), and “the means by which our sins are forgiven” (GNT). Ryken believes that all of these in some way miss the component of appeasing anger, although the idea of “atonement” implies it.

19 Ibid., 128.
Ryken also states that a loss of theological terms in the Bible will result in a loss of those theological categories.\textsuperscript{20} I’m not sure this is entirely true, since we do have theological categories like “the Trinity” that have no underlying biblical term driving the existence of the category. As I reflect on this, it seems to me that the categories he is talking about surface in answer to deeper theological and philosophical questions, not because of theological terms that are or aren’t in the biblical text. But I do think his point is still important: Literal approaches seek to retain traditional theological vocabulary precisely because these terms are able to encapsulate the fullness of language and theological mindset intended by the original language. Dynamically equivalent translations can easily miss a necessary component of the original theological term by accepting a word combination that approaches but does not express the full meaning of the term, all in the name of clarity and naturalness. This is a necessary tension and trade-off when wanting to state things in the most meaningful ways possible.\textsuperscript{21}

Consider the passage about John the Baptist and “repentance” in Matthew 3:1-12. In verse 2, John says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The Greek word μετανοεῖτε (metanoeite) is an imperative verb and is translated as \textit{repent} in the ESV. It means “to feel remorse, repent, lit. change one’s mind.” All of the major modified literal translations translate it as \textit{repent} (ESV, NASB, NKJV, NRSV). Even the NIV translates it as \textit{repent}. As for idiomatic translations, the NLT adds, “repent of your sins and turn to God,” while the TEV says, “Turn away from your sins” and the CEV, “Turn back to God!”

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 129.

\textsuperscript{21} This, however, assumes that the RL in question actually has the vocabulary to accommodate the translation. In many non-English languages throughout the world, idiomatic or paraphrastic renderings of key terms can be more helpful to the reader precisely because there isn’t a term that adequately captures the meaning of the original language, or worse yet, there is a term, but because of connotation, it communicates wrong meaning.
Several verses later, John says “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (v. 8), where the underlying Greek noun for repentance is the genitive form of the noun μετανοια (metanoia). All the aforementioned modified literal translations use repentance here, although the wording of the phrase in which it occurs varies: “worthy of repentance” (NKJV, NRSV), “in keeping with repentance” (ESV, NASB, NIV), “consistent with repentance” (HCSB). The NET Bible even uses “that proves your repentance” here. They all retain the theologically significant term repentance, while necessarily adapting it to its context. Note the loss of the genitive, though, in most renderings. As for idiomatic translations, the NLT has “[prove] that you have repented of your sins and turned to God,” the TEV has “that will show that you have turned from your sins,” and the CEV “to show that you have really given up your sins.” The dynamic versions seem to be concerned that the term repentance is no longer used or well understood in contemporary English.

A few more verses on, John says, “I baptize you with water for repentance” (v. 11, ESV). Again the Greek noun translated repentance is μετανοια (metanoia), this time in the accusative case as the object of the preposition εἰς (eis). The phrase “for repentance” occurs in almost all modified literal translations (ESV, NASB, NRSV, and even the NIV), while the NKJV has “unto repentance.” One of the biggest challenges of the modified literal approach, of course, is to maintain consistency of terms in the face of the changing syntax used with the terms. The dynamic translations use “those who repent of their sins and turn to God” (NLT), “to show that you have repented” (TEV), and “so that you will give up your sins” (CEV). The idiomatic translations have not been concerned to maintain consistency in the translation of nouns nor to rigidly reflect the Greek syntax.
Ryken’s second point is that a transparency of the original languages is retained when the focus remains on the individual words. His concern here is that translations, by their very nature, should reflect what the original author had in mind. There is no room for introducing one’s own ideas into the text, either to clarify what the author was trying to say, or to make the text easier to understand. His idea of transparency is that, by keeping an eye on what the original text says, an essentially literal translation uses vocabulary and syntax that most closely corresponds to the original text. This, then, “provides the clearest ‘window’ through which a reader can see what the original authors wrote.”

I agree that in principle, transparency of the original languages is retained through a focus on the consistent use of theological terms. The connections to the underlying text can be preserved in a way that is helpful to a modern reader, whether they know the biblical languages or not. Unfortunately, Ryken sees this goal of transparency as standing in contrast, rather than in tension, with the goal of clarity. The kind of transparency he is advocating requires as much formal correspondence as possible, and contrasts with his previous statement about formal equivalence not being absolutely necessary in an essentially literal, but not totally literal, translation. In certain cases, a direct verbal and syntactical correspondence to the original author’s thoughts and intentions may be helped by using clear and natural syntactical parallels in the RL, which then leads to an accurate and meaningful translation. However, in many other cases, meaningful translation may be hindered by retaining a rigid formal correspondence between SL and RL, which then, while it leads to a greater surface transparency, also results in a less meaningful, and thus arguably less accurate, translation.

We noted above the variations, even within the essentially literal versions, of the genitive use of *repentance*, observing the different options that were chosen to make the

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22 Ibid., 131.
phrase understandable in English. The most direct or transparent translation was “worthy of repentance,” represented in the NKJV and NRSV, but other modified literal translations allowed clarity in English syntax to trump transparency of the SL genitive form. This shows that adjustments to the text required by a mismatch between SL and RL forms is a necessary part of translation. In these cases, a modified literal approach must lean from its literal to its more modified agenda. Again, a transparency of language can be retained when theological terms are used in a consistent way. Yet, there is a necessary tension between transparency and clarity when a direct linkage between SL and RL is impossible. Advocates of a modified literal approach would do well to be clearer regarding their approach to these necessary and frequent adjustments.

Another reason Ryken gives in these chapters for using an essentially literal approach to translation has to do with keeping the full exegetical potential of the Bible. He cites this under the fullness of language heading. However, I discuss it here, because the reasoning seems to be the same as the transparency argument that we just looked at. That is, he claims that an essentially literal approach will give Bible readers “the full range of interpretive options that the original possesses.”23

But for this to be true, it assumes the essentially literal translation will retain all the SL forms in the RL text, making this a totally literal translation instead. So, if there really is a tension between maintaining a transparency to the SL language and a clarity of expression in the RL, then this tension needs to either yield to the SL forms more often than not, making it a highly literal, unacceptable translation, or it needs to yield toward the RL forms more often than not for the sake of clarity, making it a modified literal or even an idiomatic approach to

23 Ibid., 127.
translation. These latter options are fine choices for translation, but neither of them preserves “the full exegetical potential” that one thinks has been preserved.  

Ryken’s third point is that the literary qualities of the Bible are preserved when the focus remains on the individual words. Specifically, how do theological words further a biblical author’s literary intentions? I think the main way that Scripture does this is through the repetition of words referred to as literary allusions. That is, biblical authors deliberately use words that recall or bring to mind certain ideas or images from other parts of Scripture. Locations and numbers are often associated with events and significance of this kind. For example, when Matthew writes that Jesus was led by the Spirit “into the wilderness” to be tempted by the devil, and that he had fasted “forty days and forty nights” (Matt. 4:1-2, ESV), this brings to mind the experiences of the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings. The allusion points to Israel, God’s son, and the period of their trial or testing in the wilderness. Jesus, the true Son of God, was tested in much the same way as Israel, and this allusion sets up the pericope in Matthew well for this extended comparison (Deut. 8:2). In agreement with Ryken, the biblical authors chose their words for a purpose, within a context of a specific literary genre, and with the hopes of communicating God’s Word and message to a particular audience. A focus on the translation of individual words for the sake of maintaining literary allusions should be a high priority in any approach to translation.

The problem, however, comes up when considering how literary genres and their related linguistic elements are expressed differently across languages. For example, how one

24 Because Bible translation involves at least two different languages, the RL will never retain “the full exegetical potential” that one might hope for, regardless of the approach to translation used. For this reason, theological and doctrinal work should always consult the original, biblical languages as a final authority.

25 Ibid., 139-149.

26 Ibid., 141.
language structures an epistolary opening may very well be different than how another language does it. Some languages require a more explicit reference to the author, audience, and writing activity that is taking place. But in Paul’s epistles, he routinely gives us only the author and audience, leaving the thought that he is actually writing a letter as implied information. In order to maintain a clear and natural translation of the epistolary formula in the RL, the translator could introduce the missing verb, as in the sentence “I, Paul, am writing to you, Timothy.” Is this an acceptable translation addition? The translator is not inserting his own ideas into the text, nor is he attempting to correct the text, since Paul really is writing a letter. In this hypothetical but very real example, the translator is using the RL epistolary literary conventions to communicate the SL message in the most clear and natural way possible. Note that the ways of structuring epistolary formulas in different languages are legion. And again, it is a question of how and to what extent formal equivalence should be maintained that becomes a problem with respect to these various literary conventions.

Church Use

In my years as a missionary and Bible translator with Wycliffe Bible Translators, I’ve had the privilege of attending many different types of churches in many different countries. One of the things I have enjoyed discussing with fellow Christians in these various settings is what versions of Scriptures they use and why. What I have found is that many churches choose a certain translation because they believe it is the best one for their particular needs. This choice is reflected in how people speak about approaches to translation and the translations they personally choose to use.
On one side of the ledger, I find that the choice of a single translation for use by all the members of the church fosters unity. This results in a single translation being used in public worship readings, Bible exposition, and even for personal Bible memory work and devotions. It is a unifying factor for a church, and this occurs on many levels, corporate and individual alike. One could call this kind of unity *perceived authenticity*. That is, the people perceive or take the Scriptures in a particular translation to be the version that is authorized for use within their own congregation, thus creating a positive unity among the believers there.

On the other side, churches that promote a single translation over others will intentionally or inadvertently promote one approach to translation over another. Although this is not necessarily wrong, it can be detrimental to fostering a better understanding of the nature of language in general, and of the complex process of Bible translation in particular. That is, when one assumes that one approach to translation is better than another, whether their reasoning is right or wrong, this can close off an understanding of what the positives and negatives are for the other approaches. As we have seen, because of the nature of language and the complex process of Bible translation, it is not always possible or even advisable to retain a limited, black-and-white caricature of either a literal or an idiomatic approach. One must necessarily enter into the discussion of various approaches to translation with the understanding that there is value to be had on both sides of the issue.

For example, I am privileged to be able to teach adult Sunday school at a Bible church in Desoto, Texas, from time to time. One of the benefits of being in the Dallas area is that there are many home-assigned missionaries there, mainly because the home offices of several mission agencies (i.e., SIL International, Pioneer Bible Translators) are nearby, as
well as the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Dallas Baptist University. Thus, my students represent a veritable plethora of beliefs about approaches to Bible translation, to say the least. One practice I’ve adopted in class is to call on people to read the appropriate passage of Scripture, but with the caveat of having them state up front what version they are reading from. I don’t do this to lift up or disparage the use of any one approach to translation. Rather, it is for our mutual edification. As we continue to discuss what the passage at hand is saying in the various translations, adding in what the original biblical languages have said, we are able to build a range of interpretive possibilities, much in the way a good commentary would. As a result, the unity we achieve in our faith together isn’t based on simply accepting and standing on a single approach to translation over against another. Instead, it is based on comparing and contrasting the many translation possibilities that exist, thus making us all the more appreciative and aware of the complexities that are involved with the production of our own Bibles in the English language. In doing so, both literal and idiomatic approaches to translation have something positive to add to the debate.\(^{27}\)

In sum, the maintenance of theological key terms should be a primary focus of all approaches to translation, regardless of the level of literalness involved. In order to retain the fullness of language intended by the biblical authors, the transparency of language with respect to what the original authors have written, and the literary qualities related to biblical allusions, a focus on the words of the Bible in the original languages should be reflected in some way by all translation approaches. The merits of a modified literal approach, then, include, at the very least, that a translation is choosing to focus on something from the SL,

namely the theological or key words, and in doing so, is trying to reflect a care for handling those words in the RL by translating them as consistently as possible with the most appropriate equivalency available. This approach has the potential of unifying believers in how they view the Scriptures and in their understanding of the key theological issues found therein.

What are the Limitations to a Literal Approach?

Much has been written on the pitfalls of the various approaches to translation. But from the point of view of the nature of language, or “how languages really work,” and by considering this within the context of Bible translation being a complex process, I will argue there are three different areas of language that are a real problem for an approach to translation that remains overly literal: 1) concordance, polysemy, and collocational restrictions; 2) idioms, dead metaphors, and paraphrase; 3) word order and information structure. These areas represent a focus on specific words, on groups of words in phrases and clauses, and on words in sentence contexts, respectively. Other linguistic areas could conceivably have been chosen, but these should prove to be helpful in establishing some of the limitations in using an exclusively literal approach to translation.

Concordance, Polysemy, and Collocational Restrictions

Beekman and Callow begin their chapter on concordance by noting how this phenomenon occurs within a single text: “Concordance within a document occurs when the same word or expression is used repeatedly to refer to the same specific concept.”28 In other

28 Beekman and Callow, 152.
words, concordance within a single language and document occurs when one word is consistently used for one concept. No more, no less. But many words in language are often polysemous, meaning that they have more than one concept or sense attached to them. The authors raise the issues of concordance and polysemy in isolation in order to get at their true nature, separating them out from the complex process of Bible translation.

Beekman and Callow go on to make a distinction between what they call pseudo concordance and real concordance. Pseudo concordance is when a single word is polysemous and has, for the sake of argument here, senses A and B. An example of polysemy in Greek is the word ὄὐρανός (ouranos), which can mean heaven, as in the place where God dwells, or sky, as in the blue sky above. The one word has at least two distinct senses. When such a word is used with these various senses in the same text or document, then the occurrence of that word has only the appearance of concordance. An example of this is when the religious leaders use ὄὐρανός in the phrase “a sign from heaven” (Matt 16:1), and then Jesus uses the same word in the phrase “the sky is red” (Matt 16:2). All English translations I consulted recognize the polysemy here by translating the single Greek term ὄυρανός as “heaven” and “sky,” respectively. This is pseudo concordance, although it is also a play on words on Jesus’ part.

On the other hand, when sense A of this word is used repeatedly in the same document, and it is the author’s intention to repeat and bring to mind sense A of the word, then all of the occurrences of that word are said to have real concordance. As mentioned above, consistent use of key terms is a strong virtue of modified literal translations, in that it gives a text coherence. An example of this would be Matthew’s use of the word ὄυρανός in the repeated phrase ἡ βασιλεία τῶν ὄυρανῶν (hē basileia tōn ouranōn), by both John the
Baptist and Jesus, which means the kingdom of heaven. The author intends to bring the same concept to mind each time the phrase is used. Beekman and Callow sum this up by stating, “pseudo concordance is both arbitrary and inevitable, but real concordance is just the opposite – it is deliberate, a specifically chosen feature of discourse, intentionally used by the writer.”\(^{29}\) They also add that real concordance is “a linguistic feature of form that the translator should, if at all possible, carry over into the RL version.”\(^{30}\)

The problem with real concordance comes up when trying to translate all words consistently across languages. For all the good things that can be said about maintaining a fullness of language, having transparency with respect to the original languages, and being able to see the re-occurrence of theological, key terms and literary allusions in translation, one should not assume that different languages work the same, or more precisely, that the lexical structure of one language is the same as another.

Mark Strauss rightly calls this “the fallacy of lexical concordance.”\(^{31}\) The argument goes like this: Words can be polysemous, meaning they can, and often do, have more than one sense. Taken together, this is a word’s range of senses, also called a word’s semantic range. But a word’s semantic range will rarely, if ever, match up precisely with another word’s semantic range in another language. Because translation normally involves only one sense of a word in any given context, it is unwise to have a translation policy that calls for maintaining a total lexical concordance of words in all contexts. This ignores the difference between pseudo and real concordance as stated above—the fact that each of the words is

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 154.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 155.

structured differently and has other senses that won’t match up. Thus, complete lexical concordance, as in having an approach to translation where a single SL word matches up consistently with a single RL word, “promotes a false view of language and translation.”

As an example of a lexical concordance and the problems associated with it, consider the *collocational restrictions* that words have. Collocational restrictions are word patterns and combinations that a word naturally has with other words in a language. Because of this, some combinations of words will sound right to the ear, while others will sound funny or wrong. A non-native will immediately give himself away as a second language speaker by not knowing how words collocate in a language. Mark Strauss gives examples of collocations for the Greek verb ποιέω (*poieō*), which means “to do, make.” In the NT, it is used in the clauses “*make* fruit” (Matt. 3:8), “*make* adultery” (Matt. 5:32), “*make* alms” (Matt. 6:2), “*make* a council” (Mark 15:1), “*make* power” (Luke 1:51), “*make* healthy” (John 5:11), and “*make* the work” (John 17:4). These all sound right to those who spoke the original languages, but not so much in English. The ESV, however, translates each one respectively as “*bear* fruit,” “*commit* adultery,” “*give* to the needy,” “*hold* a consultation,” “*show* strength,” “*heal*,” and “*accomplish* the work.” In these seven examples, the ESV has used seven different verbs to translate the same verb ποιέω. To their credit, the translators of the ESV have resisted the temptation to hold to a policy of full lexical concordance, or a forced word-for-word translation strategy, which would require the word ποιέω to be translated with a single English word consistently, thus violating the collocational restrictions it has in English. Rather, they have chosen to translate each instance of the verb using the most clear

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32 Ibid.
and natural words in each context. In other words, the proper English collocates were chosen in the RL, allowing the language to function naturally as it should. However, I do question at what point the need to give attention to the collocational restrictions of the RL forces a modified literal approach to translation, which in principle seeks to retain the SL forms in the RL, to operate more like an idiomatic approach?

The upshot of this is that different languages really do say the very same things, but often in very different ways, and this necessitates having a better understanding of the lexical structure or make-up of all the languages involved in the translation process. The nature of language is such that the very words of a language have their own, individualized rules that govern how they can be used successfully in communication. Because of this, the complex process of translation must take into account how both the SL and RL structure their words, so that a real concordance of terms can be achieved in translation, while at the same time avoiding the violation or overriding of the natural language collocations in the RL.

Idioms, Dead Metaphors, And Paraphrase

Next, consider the translation of figures of speech across languages. Idioms are expressions or word combinations that taken together mean something different than what the individual words taken separately might mean. By definition, their words cannot be understood literally, but rather, they function together as semantic unit. For example, the

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34 During my linguistics and translation training at the Graduate Institute for Applied Linguistics in Dallas, Texas, Les Bruce, a linguistics professor and translator with SIL International, gave the rule of thumb that a new, expatriate translator was not ready to begin translation work until their language learning skills in the RL had progressed to the point of learning and incorporating multiple senses of words into their lexicon. In his mind, this would signify that the new translator was beginning to get a feel for the complexities and nuances involved with different words in the language and were showing a readiness for the similar language challenges involved in translation work.

35 Beekman and Callow, 121.
ESV at Mark 1:32 says, “they brought to him all who were sick,” while the Greek referent in question is πάντας τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας (pantas tous kakōs echontas). The Greek clause translated literally is “all the ones having badly,” which is terrible English. “To have badly” is a Greek idiom for being sick. That’s the way we say it in English, and the ESV has done well to make the necessary adjustments. Another example from the ESV at Matthew 1:18: “Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit,” while the Greek in question is ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα (en gastri echousa). Because the Greek clause translated literally is “having with belly” (or “womb”), and because this is terrible English, there is a need for adjustment. But how? The ESV retains the locative element “with,” substituting “to be” for “having” and “child” for “belly.” It is an English euphemism for pregnancy. In both of these cases, the literal translation in English is almost understandable, but that’s just not how we say it. In the end, a direct translation of the individual words without adjustments isn’t possible or desirable.

Dead metaphors are another example of figures of speech that can’t be translated literally. Metaphors, like similes, are comparisons, but they do not have an explicit “like” or “as” marker, showing what comparison is being made. As a simple illustration, consider the similes found at 1 Peter 1:24-25, “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” The first simile is “all flesh is like grass.” The topic of the simile is “the particular item or event under discussion or, it may be, the people being addressed.” In this example, the topic is “all flesh.” The image, on the other hand, is “that part of the comparison which is intended to

36 Fee and Strauss, 62-63.
37 Ibid., 64.
38 Beekman and Callow, 128
illustrate the subject under discussion.” In this example, the image is “grass.” Lastly, the point of similarity “states what the comparison or resemblance between topic and image is.” Again in our example, the point of similarity is stated later in the verse as “withers.” In short, the first simile is “all flesh is like grass in that it withers.”

A metaphor has all of these same components of meaning, but it will lack the explicit comparison marker. An example of a metaphor is found at James 3:6, “the tongue is a fire.” The rest of the verse, then, gives the point of comparison as James talks about setting one’s life on fire. Of course, the entire metaphor can be spelled out as a simile, as in, “the tongue is like a fire in that it can destroy what it touches.” Note that similes and metaphors can leave out one of these three components, depending on what is in view. For example, Jesus says, “Go and tell that fox” (Luke 13:32). The topic is obviously Herod, taken from a previously mentioned reference, and the point of similarity is that he’s crafty and shrewd. But Jesus doesn’t state either of these. They are implicit in the phrase “that fox.”

Metaphors, however, can be further distinguished by being either live or dead. A live metaphor is related to the primary sense of a word that is being used in a metaphorical sense, and it illustrates a comparison that is evoked in the mind of the reader. In other words, a live metaphor actively triggers the associations and comparisons to which the metaphor is pointing at the time of reading or hearing. For example, consider when Jesus says, “I am the true vine” (John 15:1) and then later refers to his disciples, saying, “you are the branches” (v. 6). These are live metaphors, with a metaphorical use of the vine image and

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39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 133.
42 Fee and Strauss, 67.
all that it entails in the minds of the disciples. However, this is in contrast to how a dead metaphor works, which is understood directly without attention given to the primary sense of the word. In this way, a dead metaphor, like an idiom, has a fixed meaning and doesn’t mean what the individual words seem to mean.\textsuperscript{43} The difference between dead metaphor and idiom, though, is that a dead metaphor was once a live metaphor, while an idiom has no metaphoric or comparative characteristics. It is an expression.

Of course, the problem in the complex process of Bible translation is when a modified literal translation approach just isn’t possible. Because of this, literal versions must choose. They can either stay with and translate idioms and dead metaphors according to a literal, word-for-word approach, creating an inevitable clash between literal correctness at the word level on the one hand and meaningful communication on the other, or they can abandon their approach and translate more idiomatically, opting for clarity, naturalness, and meaningful translation instead.\textsuperscript{44} Often, modified literal translations will attempt a combination of both. In hopes of remaining transparent to the SL, they retain some of the key words from the idiom or dead metaphor, while casting these key words in such a way that gives more clarity and naturalness in the RL. The problem with this strategy, though, is that they end up creating something in English that is neither idiom nor dead metaphor. It is a group of individual words with individual meanings, but with the appearance of being somewhat figurative, thus creating a tension in how it should be interpreted.\textsuperscript{45}

It should be somewhat obvious that, because Bible translation is a complex process that involves two or more languages, there is a need from time to time to be able to say some

\textsuperscript{43} Beekman and Callow, 133.

\textsuperscript{44} Fee and Strauss, 63.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 69.
things using different words. This idea will now be taken up further under the heading of *paraphrase*. Of the various approaches to translation, paraphrase means something like “a free translation,” and it is usually associated with Beekman’s and Callow’s “unduly free” approach. These types of translations are not considered to be acceptable, standard translations. Why? The authors of paraphrase translations attempt to communicate the biblical message using a reduced or plain language, restating things in their own words. Those who disparage paraphrase translations see the translator as taking too much liberty with the original text, making the Bible say things that just aren’t there. However, in linguistics, the word “paraphrase” simply means “the process or result of producing alternate versions of a sentence or text without changing its meaning.” The subtle difference here is that for the linguistic use of the term, meaning is not lost in the transfer process. So the important question for us to consider is this: In the linguistic sense, is paraphrase a useful tool among the acceptable translation approaches?

Back when I began my SIL linguistic studies with Pete Silzer at Biola University in 1993, I understood a little bit about lexical semantics, synonyms and the various types of antonyms, but that was about it. I quickly learned that words could also have hypernyms and hyponyms, too. Of course, the synonyms and antonyms of a word are the words that have meanings that are the most like and the most opposite of a word, respectively. Hypernyms and hyponyms, on the other hand, are the category labels of those words that exist above and below a word, figuratively speaking. For example, the word *dog* has near synonyms of

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46 If the goal of a paraphrase translation is to make the Bible more accessible or contemporary, or to reach a less educated or second-language audience, then on these grounds, it is an acceptable translation approach, properly understood.


hound, canine, or mutt, depending on context, and its most obvious antonym is cat. It has a hypernym of animal, because it is in the animal class, and it has its own hyponyms of black lab, chihuahua, and pit bull. It is interesting to think that words have these synonymous, antonymous, generic and specific relations among other words of their own kind. Generic hypernyms are often used in making dictionary entries, precisely because they do indicate the class or category of a word, and specific hyponyms are likewise often used as examples of the class or category in these same entries.

When I took up linguistic studies again with Les Bruce at the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics in 2005, I was introduced to the semantic ideas of Anna Wierzbicka, et al. Dr. Bruce presented these concepts within the context of understanding semantic and pragmatic principles for doing linguistics and Bible translation work. Interestingly, the principles of this semantic theory, called Natural Semantic Metalanguage, or more commonly reductive paraphrase, speak directly to avoiding circularity and obscurity in definitions, dictionary, and glossary entries. The first principle of this semantic theory says to use the simplest terms possible in defining things. Practically speaking, this means that definitions, dictionaries, and glossary entries of words must necessarily be made using other words that are simpler than the word being defined. Technical jargon of any kind should not be used. The second principle says to make definitions without circularity or residue. Dr. Bruce commented on this often, saying that a dictionary or glossary definition should never use the lemma, or the word being defined, in the definition itself. In other words, definitions can be done using simpler words, fully and without saying too little or too much. From the first two principles, the third principle reasons that there is a set of words in every language that are simple and irreducible, the basic building blocks of language. These are the words
that are used in the definitions of other words, but they themselves can’t be further defined. In other words, not only can words be defined by other, simpler words, fully and completely, without circularity or residue, but the lexical structure of language is such that some of the more complicated words will reduce to other words and word combinations until one reaches this set of irreducible words. These primitive words, then, can’t be reduced any further. They are the “semantic primes” of language.49

As a comparison, my college background before Bible translation, which included linguistics and theology, was in mathematics. In basic math, there is this idea of fraction reduction, where 4/8 is reducible to 2/4, which is also reducible to 1/2. Of course, 4/8 = 1/2, at least as far as they are both equal to 0.5. But in statistics, 4/8 might actually represent some tangible data that can’t be done away with easily, so equality of fractions is both true and tenuous. With that caveat, fractions can be reduced in math and their equivalent results used productively in many circumstances. Is it possible, then, that a similar process of fraction reduction is available in language work? Can words or phrases be reduced to their underlying components in such a way that equivalency remains while using different words?

Returning to linguistics, the words cry, holler, howl, screech, shout, shriek, wail, and yell are near synonyms. In other words, they all mean more or less the same thing, but would be used with slightly different meanings in slightly different contexts. These are all ways of saying something loudly (i.e., they all contain the component of being speech verbs), but some involve pain, some fear, some sorrow, etc. (i.e., they all contain an additional component that distinguishes it from the other verbs in the list). I would think shout or yell is the most basic of these verbs. One of the gripes against paraphrase approaches to translation

is that the translators are taking liberty of introducing their own ideas into the text, making the Bible say something that isn’t there. Point taken. But as stated here, linguistic paraphrase is an attempt to say the same thing, but using different words. Why would anyone want to do this in translation? As we have already seen, not everything in the Bible can be translated directly or literally with correct meaning. When single words use secondary senses or collocational restrictions apply, adjustments to word choices should be made. But when multiple words in idioms and dead metaphors apply, the adjustments that are made must necessarily avoid translations that give no meaning or wrong meaning. Therefore, idiomatic translations use linguistic paraphrase as a tool when idioms and dead metaphors can’t be translated literally.

Consider Mark 3:28. Here Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man.” What does the phrase “the children of man” mean? And are only children in view? This idiom, which is uncommon in English, is τοὺς υἱοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων (tois huiois tōn anthrōpōn) in the Greek, and it translates literally as “to the sons of men.” The NASB and NKJV use a literal “the sons of men,” while the NRSV, HCSB, and NIV use the generic “people,” but as the subject of a more natural passive sentence, “people will be forgiven.” Interestingly, “people” is a simple word that reduces the literal words, but it corresponds well with the referent and intended meaning of the phrase in question.

Consider also Matthew 6:34. The Greek ἀρκετὸν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἡ κακία αὐτῆς (arketon tē hēmera hē kakia autēs) is translated as “Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” This is as close to a literal translation as one can hope for, and the NKJV also uses it. Of course, some prefer it because of its poetic, proverbial sound. The NASB, HCSB, and NIV, though, say “Each day has enough trouble of its own.” I personally find “enough” to be a simpler
translation than “sufficient” in this context, and I also find “each day” to be a simpler translation than “for the day.” Taken as a whole, “Each day has enough trouble of its own” is also more grammatically clear than “Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” In other words, it is a clear, less obscure translation because it treats language more naturally in this awkward situation.

Finally, consider the end of Philippians 4:6, which says τὰ αἰτήματα ὑμῶν γνωριζέσθω πρὸς τὸν θεόν (ta aitēmata humōn gnōrizesthō pros ton theon) in the Greek, and which translates as “let your requests be made known to God.” They have only changed the word order, but have maintained all the elements, more or less. The NASB, NKJV, NRSV, and HCSB all use this translation as well. Other translations, though, simplify the language by saying “present your request to God” (NIV, TNIV) and “tell your requests to God” (NET). They simplify the awkward “let . . . be made known” by using a more natural lexical collocation and a more direct grammar.

In sum, there are problems associated with translating groups of words in Bible translation, especially when they involve idioms and dead metaphors. This is because there are two different languages involved in the translation process, and each has something to contribute to the process. When the biblical SL forms of lexical or grammatical structures are allowed to overrule the RL in these areas, either no meaning, or wrong meaning, or even an awkward reading can be the result. In order to combat this tension between form and meaning, many translations use techniques of linguistic paraphrase. That is, they use simplified lexical and grammatical structures so that the same meaning comes across clearly and without obscurity. This reflects a more informed view of the nature of language as it relates to the complex process of Bible translation.
Word Order and Information Structure

Sentence *word order* is an important concept in linguistics. Languages are classified according to the basic ordering of their core elements: subject, verb, and direct object. Taking the first letter of each of these core elements, English is referred to as an SVO language, while the Koiné Greek of the NT is VSO. This means that for the latter one can expect to find the Greek verb in the sentence-initial position much of the time. This is called its *unmarked* position – the order one would expect when none of the elements in question is receiving special emphasis. One thing that can affect word order in the NT, though, is literary genre. That is, narrative materials, like the four Gospels and Acts, will shift the verb out of its initial position for reasons related to temporal, locational, and background information, while non-narrative materials, like the Pauline epistles, will shift the verb out of this position for reasons related to a change of topic. There are overlaps here, but suffice it to say, the different genres will structure their discourses and sentences differently, and this should be understood. However, what remains constant for both of these genres is this: if the verb is not in the sentence-initial position, something else is sentence-initial, and it is there for a reason.

*Information structure* is the linguistic idea that sentences contain information, and the speaker or writer relays the information to the hearer or reader in a certain, conventional way in order to communicate effectively. For example, if I say quite plainly, “I bought a car,” without any significant emphasis on any of the words, it would be a simple assertion or statement of fact, even though I haven’t bought a car in quite a while. In other words, the emphasis would be on the statement as a whole, not on any of the individual constituents of the sentence. But, if someone asked me, “*What did you buy?*” and I said to them, “I bought a
“car!” my intonation would indicate that my focus or emphasis was now on the word “car” in this sentence. Notice that both sentences are still in the basic SVO word order of English, and notice, too, that the actual information given hasn’t changed from the flat, plain statement above. Only the intonation of spoken English has been changed. I easily could have shortened my response and said, “A CAR!” This would have been a more direct response to their question, and we often talk like that. Now, if I were to go on and on about this, I might say something like, “A car, that’s what I bought. Can you believe it? A car! A brand new car, and it’s all mine.” This example shows how the sentence-initial position can be used in English to convey focus or emphasis of sentence constituents other than the unmarked SVO word order, and traditional grammarians have called this technique “fronting.” Now, if the question switches to “Who bought the car?” I might answer, “Me, I bought the car!” My focus now is on me. I can use intonation to indicate this, or, as my written answer shows, I can highlight my response by using a grammatical construction that shifts the emphasized answer to the front. In each of these examples, the information hasn’t really changed, but the focus on information has by using intonation, word order, and grammatical devices to signal the emphasis in question.

We are often told in our initial biblical languages courses that word order is more variable in languages like NT Greek because it uses a case system to indicate the various elements of the sentence. Because of this, words are more free to move around and still be properly identified. This statement seems to make sense, but it isn’t exactly right. Although case systems do have the potential to allow for more variability in word order, the need to communicate things like context-setting points of departure, topical shifts in discourse, and focal elements are still very real concerns that impinge on how the information is ultimately
structured in language. Because there are these competing levels of communication in language, and in order to keep track of them all, the grammatical resources are divided up and distributed among the various structures, yet all the while language necessarily comes at us all at once in a linear, word-after-word manner. Linguistic studies in both pragmatics and discourse analysis show how natural language functions at and above the sentence level, with connectors, points of departures, participant reference, topic, and focus markers, all joining information across sentence boundaries.

Consider word order in the Greek NT. For situations other than the default, verb-initial word order in Greek, grammarians have traditionally labeled the sentence-initial position as the focal position, or more generally, the position of emphasis. In more recent scholarship, however, studies have shown that the information structure of NT Greek reserves the sentence-initial position for marking both topical and focal relations, which is a more specific understanding of this frequent occurrence.50

Stephen Levinsohn, in his work on the discourse features of NT Greek, refers to points of departure as sentence-initial elements that do two things: they provide a starting point for the text that follows, and they cohesively anchor the following text to the previous context.51 Situational points of departure are sentence-initial elements, usually in the form of adverbial words and phrases, and are used to organize the structure of a discourse. They can function at the highest levels of the text, marking episode and paragraph divisions, or they can function at a lower levels, simply identifying a switch from one temporal or locational situation to another, without marking boundary discontinuities.


For example, Acts 15:36 begins with the prepositional phrase Μετὰ δὲ τινας ἡμέρας (Meta de tinas hēmeras), “And/Now after some days.” This sentence-initial Greek phrase is a temporal expression used to mark a clear episode and paragraph division as the participants Paul and Barnabas begin discussing further work together. Because it marks a major break, this is a prototypical, high-level use of a situational point of departure. An example of a low-level use of a situational point of departure is Acts 16:13, which says τῇ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων (tē te hēmera tōn sabbatōn), “On the Sabbath day.” Again, this is sentence-initial in Greek and is a temporal expression. However, it is found within an episode and so only serves to mark time at that point in the text. To be sure, it is still marking a discontinuity, although not on par with a section or episode break. Thus, it is a prototypical, low-level use of a situational point of departure involving a temporal expression. Note that, in travelogues, a locational phrase is just as likely to be used in the organizational structuring of a narrative text as is a temporal one.

A further point needs to be stated about the sentence-initial position. Technically speaking, NT Greek is a VSO language, and so, conjunctions aside, the verb usually fills the sentence-initial slot. However, there are times when a non-verb, that is, a temporal or locational adverb, or even an entire temporal or locational clause that does contain a verb, are used to fill the sentence-initial slot and have the same function as a point of departure. For example, Acts 16:35 says Ἡμέρας δὲ γενομένης (Hēmeras de genomenēs), which translates as “When day happened,” or “The next morning.” Note, this is functioning as an organizational device, setting the temporal parameter for the next portion of text. Technically speaking, it is not a simple sentence-initial element, but rather, a temporal clause. Levinsohn contends that, from a functional standpoint, temporal clauses that function to organize the
structure of a narrative will occupy that same sentence-initial slot with respect to the rest of the sentence, whether they are simple words, phrases, or clauses. On the other hand, Levinsohn has made it clear that any temporal or locative phrases that do not occur in the sentence-initial position are not functioning as points of departure. In other words, they are not functioning as text-organizing devices. For translation, this means that such non-initial temporal and locative elements should not be used as the basis for which to structure the text. Context, of course, can help to sort this out further. \(^{52}\)

Referential points of departure also function to organize a text. Because referential points of departure are nominal elements in some sense (i.e., nouns, as in objects and people), their most obvious use is in structuring non-narrative materials. Common leading words of such phrasal constructions are “according to” and “as for.” For example, Acts 17:2 starts with κατὰ δὲ τὸ εἰῶθος τῶν Παῦλῳ (kata de to eiōthos tō Paulō), “And/Now according to the custom with Paul.” This seems to be a low-level function: it is not being used by Luke to structure the larger discourse. Rather, it is simply the basis by which the rest of the sentence is to be read and interpreted.

There are other uses of referential points of departure, too. That is, those sentence-initial elements that are nominal in character and have a specific organizing function or purpose within the larger framework of the text. The most basic function that comes to mind is the use of pronouns in the sentence-initial slot. For example, Acts 16:17 begins with αὐτῆ κατακολουθοῦσα τῷ Παῦλῳ καὶ ἡμῖν ἔκραζεν λέγοσα (hautē katakolouthousa tō Paulō kai hēmin ekrazen legousa), “She/This one, following Paul and us, was crying out saying. . . .”

\(^{52}\) During my linguistic studies in Dallas, 2007, I was able to meet Stephen Levinsohn and express to him my concern about information structure in the Greek NT. I asked him how sure he was that this way of looking at the language of the NT was correct. He said, and I paraphrase, “Eric, I’ve consulted with translators and linguists in over 350 different languages around the world. What we are saying about how word order and information structure work in the Greek NT is exactly how other languages deal with these same phenomena.”
Levinsohn notes that pronouns that occur in sentence-initial position are not the default, verb-initial case. Sentences with known, recurrent subjects usually do not have an explicit pronoun, since the reference is contained within the verbal morphology. When there is a sentence-initial pronoun present, then, it serves to mark the topic referent, which indicates the presence of background information. Such pronouns are normally found after the introduction of some new participant, but before going on to the participant’s action sequence. Because of this, statements about the participant are made using stative verbs or other verbs that do not indicate action. In the case above, the imperfect is used to bring to mind an habitual situation, thus laying the background for what follows.

In the parlance of information structure, this is an example of topic reference. The known entity, the pronoun, is overtly stated simply to identify a change in topic. Since the expected chain of events in narrative is the unmarked VSO word order, (without restating the continuing subject in successive sentences), the unexpected pronoun alerts the reader to a change from the usual, unmarked sentence structure and function.

Another use of the nominal sentence-initial elements is one which traditional grammarians call switch reference. By this they mean to say that the subject of the previous sentence has changed, and so, the new person who is doing the next action needs to be made explicit before stating the accompanying action. Since VSO is the normal word order for conveying event sequences when no change of subject occurs, the appearance of a sentence-initial element is triggering a temporary focus on the switch of subjects with the purpose of highlighting the new subject at that point. Switch reference often occurs with reported speech as the respondents are called by name in the speech formula. For example, in Acts 16:30 the Philippian jailer asks “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” and the response formula uses a
sentence-initial subject pronoun, oí δὲ εἶπαν (*hoi de eipan*), “They answered” (v. 31).

Likewise, in Acts 16:36 the jailer relays some information to Paul, and Paul’s response is introduced as ó δὲ Παῦλος ἔφη πρὸς αὐτούς (*ho de Paulos ephē pros autous*), “But Paul said to them” (v. 37). The ping-pong structure of conversation calls for some kind of recognition of the change in speakers, and the Greek of the NT uses the sentence-initial position to highlight the temporary focus of the next speaker in the chain. For this reason, these temporary focus elements function at a low level, within the immediate context in which they are found.

Returning to our original discussion of focus, traditional grammarians often refer to the fronting of sentence elements as indicating *emphasis* when, in fact, emphatic focus only makes up a small fraction of the overall sentence-initial cases encountered. Sentence-initial focus in the Greek NT, when used for emphasis, tends to involve recurring words that are easily identified. For example, Acts 16:23 talks of “inflicting them with *many* blows” (translation mine), where πολλάς (*pollas*, “many”) is sentence-initial. The same can be seen in Acts 17:12: “Many of them believed.” At Acts 18:17, “Sosthenes is beaten in front of the court, but *none of this* bothers Gallio a bit.” Here, καὶ οὐδὲν τούτων (*kai ouden toutōn*) is in the sentence-initial position. What these examples show is that emphatic focus seems to occur most naturally with words that themselves convey an emphasis of some sort, as with words like *many, all, and none*. These are cases of hyperbole, overstatement, and understatement, respectively. The Greek of the NT uses the sentence-initial position to alert the hearer to the markedness of the sentence at hand, while the actual contents in the position tell the reader to process it as emphatic information.
The aim of this section has been to show quite plainly that the sentence-initial position in the Greek NT, when not occupied by a verb, is a marked position. It can mark one of a number of things: a temporal or locational point of departure, a shift in topic, or a focal relationship to the rest of the sentence. The sentence-initial position can affect the overall structuring of a text at a high level, or it can affect the elements of the sentence in which it occurs at a lower level. But the point is this: A sentence-initial element other than a verb is the trigger that should alert the reader to some kind of marked change from the default pattern of sentence processing.

It is clear from the above that a literal approach to the complex process of Bible translation must necessarily account for how issues of word order play out in translation. It isn’t just a matter of style but of communicating meaning and authorial intent. Will Greek word order be followed in English? If so, why? What are the principles by which a modified literal translation can opt for following the RL structures in this respect?

Note that there is a fortuitous outcome in all of this. The temporal and locational points of departure noted above, which occur sentence-initial and are used to organize a text at a higher level, also occur in that position in other languages. As a result, a literal approach to translation will manage to keep these organizational features intact as an English speaker would expect them. However, a literal, word-for-word translation into English of the lower level, sentence-initial elements used to indicate a shift in topic or focus will not always work. To attempt to do so would violate English word order as well as English information structure rules.

For example, Matthew 24:30 says in Greek, καὶ τότε φανήσεται τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἄνθρωπον ἐν οὐρανῷ (kai tote phanēsetai to sēmeion tou theou tou anthrōpou en
ouranō), which the ESV translates, “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man.” Note that, in Greek, following the connectors καὶ τότε, it is really just an unmarked VSO sentence. Therefore, the proper English equivalent word order should be SVO, or “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky,” which the NASB and others follow. Another example is at Luke 13:23, where the disciples ask Jesus, εἰ ὀλίγοι οἱ σωζόμενοι (ei oligoi hoi sōzomenoi) which is translated “will those who are saved be few?” in the ESV. Another literal translation, the NRSV, has correctly seized the word order problem here and opted for a more natural “will only a few be saved?” Notice that “few” is a word with natural lexical emphasis. The NRSV word order allows for the restructuring of the question, juxtaposing the verb and subject, and then inserting “only” as a help to show the intended emphasis of the Greek.

The upshot of this is that there will necessarily be a tension in translation when word order and information structure issues surface. How Greek handles these things is often different from how English handles them. In opting to maintain a transparency of language by using a word-for-word strategy in translation, literal translations often aren’t able to adapt to the clear and natural style in English needed to properly convey the significance of these deeper level meanings associated with topic and focus issues.

Why a Mediating Position?

One of the fundamental theorems of Bible translation is that it is possible. That is, although Bible translation is a complex process involving two or more languages, it is generally agreed that it is an activity that can be accomplished with a certain amount of success. However, although Bible translation is possible, it is also axiomatic that it is an

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No language has complete correspondence with another language, and the peculiarities of each language often defy analysis. This means that translators must be satisfied with approximations when they seek to apply principles of Bible translation consistently across diverse languages. These thoughts lead to the realization that the complex process of Bible translation, which employs linguistic principles to harmonize what is theoretically possible with what are its many real-life approximations, is necessarily both art and science, regardless of one’s preferred approach to translation.

With this in mind, another basic thought in Bible translation has to do with the interrelated concepts of accuracy, clarity, and naturalness. These are often cited as the three pillars of translation because they reflect a tri-perspectival view of truth in translation: Without accuracy, a translation can’t claim to have communicated the author’s original intentions. Without clarity, a translation can’t claim to have communicated the information contained in the text well. And without naturalness, a translation can’t claim to have communicated to the reader effectively. The strictly literal and idiomatic approaches, however, tend to favor either the SL or RL on this account. That is, a highly literal or even a modified literal translation approach, in desiring a close adherence to the original, will lean toward the SL and toward maintaining accuracy in translation when these three pillars come

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into conflict. Likewise, a highly idiomatic or unduly free translation approach will lean toward the RL and toward maintaining clarity and naturalness when there is a conflict regarding these pillars. The problem is that each of these approaches ends up highlighting one aspect of the translation process at the expense of another.\(^59\)

A mediating approach to translation avoids this pitfall by keeping the three pillars of translation in tension, not in conflict. Because of this, it is free to balance the needs of accuracy, clarity, and naturalness precisely when the SL and RL dictate. That is, these pillars are allies, three aspects of one reality, where an appeal from one pillar to the others is not a weakness or concession of approach, it is a strength. For example, when a conflict arises between the SL and RL forms, accuracy can be maintained by an appeal to clarity and naturalness of language in the RL, in order to convey the same meaning at precisely that point. Unlike the other approaches, a mediating approach is able to accept and acknowledge all the various complexities and realities inherent in language and Bible translation, and then to apply this knowledge for the sake of having the most accurate, clear, and natural translation possible.\(^60\)


\(^60\) In my opinion, the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (HCSB) does the best job of consistently balancing the needs of accuracy, clarity, and naturalness in Bible translation by using their “optimal equivalence” strategy. Note that one could say the ESV is also a mediating approach, but with more emphasis on literalness and accuracy, while the NIV is also a mediating approach, but with more emphasis on being idiomatic and natural. That is, the hybrid designations modified literal or essentially literal really do overlap with a mediating approach to translation in many ways.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Bible translation is a complex process that involves at least two different languages. The Bible itself and church history both attest to the fact that the Scriptures can be translated into other languages with clarity of meaning so that the Word of God comes with the power of the Holy Spirit upon those who hear its message (1 Thess. 1:2-10). Likewise, general theology and the humanities, in the form of linguistic study and research, attest to the fact that a better understanding of the nature of language and the complex process of Bible translation is also possible. That is, by studying how languages really work, it is possible to improve both our understanding of the nature of language and the complex process of Bible translation. In turn, these serve to advance the translation of God’s Word into the many diverse languages of the world that are still in need of it.

However, there are times when the two languages involved in the translation process are so different that a more literal approach to translation causes problems. That is, if a modified literal translation approach is held to under all circumstances, one risks miscommunication of the message of Scripture, precisely because the SL and RL forms and their meanings do not match up well, as with the various language issues mentioned above. The strength of a modified literal translation approach is that it retains a “window” on the original biblical languages. As noble as this sounds, it comes at a price, which is the potential loss of clarity, naturalness, and meaning in the RL. It is the necessary, undesirable byproduct
of an approach to translation that treats language as something it is not. Of course, the modified literal approach has popular support because it has many positive qualities that can and should be retained in translation. Nevertheless, this approach should only be used with a good understanding of what its limitations are.

For these reasons, a mediating approach to Bible translation is a better option. Not only can theological key terms be retained for the sake of richness and coherence, but clear and natural language can also be employed at those very instances where it is necessary to overcome the pitfalls associated with maintaining a modified literal approach. When one opts for a mediating approach, one is laying claim to the realities of the nature of language: sometimes it can be handled in a direct, straightforward manner; at other times it cannot. That’s how language works, and that’s how a mediating approach deals with the complexities of Bible translation.

Some call the mediating approach a “thought-for-though” approach to translation. I find that description to be unfortunate. Just as no modified literal approach can be totally literal but involves modifications and adjustments of many kinds, so, too, the mediating approach is not a completely idiomatic process. The thought-for-thought metaphor may have arisen because of those elements in language that defy a word-for-word approach. In that sense, it is a good metaphor. But a mediating approach to translation, by definition, mediates by using various strategies included in both modified literal and idiomatic approaches. That is, it is an approach that is free to harness the strengths of using theological key terms consistently, especially where they have historical and ecclesiastical significance. It is also free to embrace the strengths of an idiomatic approach at precisely those points where a literal rendering of the SL comes into conflict with clarity, naturalness, and understanding in
the RL. However, it is not free to ignore the abuses often associated with idiomatic translation approaches. Rather, it consciously avoids the lack of controls over what can legitimately be placed in the text, which can lead to the translator shaping the text too much out of a desire to prompt a particular response from the reader. A mediating approach, then, is a balanced solution to a complex problem, holding a number of things in necessary tension in a way that accurately reflects the nature of language and the complex process that is Bible translation.
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