

SESSION THREE: Modern Translations and Translation Theory

I. The Goals and Purpose of Bible Translation

A. What is the main goal of translating the Bible?

1. The goal of translation is to accurately convey the meaning of the original text into the receptor language.

B. What makes a translation “good”?¹

1. *Accurate*: The main goal of translation is to accurately reproduce the meaning. When moving from Hebrew and Greek to English (or whatever language) the goal is to reproduce the meaning, rather than the form. While there are difference theories on how exactly this should be accomplished, (almost) everyone agrees that conveying meaning is the primary focus.

2. *Clear*: A good translation should be just as clear to modern readers of the English language as the Hebrew or Greek was clear to its original readers.

3. *Natural*: A translation should sound like common, normal, and natural English. Languages are constantly changing and growing, which is one of the reasons we need new and updated translations.

4. *Audience-Appropriate*: It is good for different translations to target specific audiences. For instance, there are translations for children, or for non-native English speakers. Translations should seek to have a vocabulary and style that is understandable to most people, and that would be appropriate to be read aloud in church.

II. Translation Theories

A. The Spectrum of Bible Translations

1. There are a bunch of different “translation theories,” but I think the most helpful way to understand this topic is by viewing all of them on a spectrum. The farthest to the left, we have translations that are more form-based, and the farthest to the right are the translations that are more meaning based. Along this spectrum, it is helpful to plot five different points.

B. The Five Points on the Spectrum²

1. *“Literal” or “Word for Word”*: Although we will later see that the terms “literal” and “word for word” are inaccurate when it comes to Bible translations, it is helpful here to make a point: There is only one example of a truly “literal” translation, and that is an interlinear Bible. Interlinear Bibles list the words in the original language in their original order, and then include a basic “gloss” or definition under each word. Reading an interlinear like it is a normal translation would lead to nothing but confusion. Thus, an interlinear is not really a translation, but rather is helpful for showing the word order and form of the original.

2. *Formal Equivalence*: These types of translations attempt to maintain the formal structures of the original Hebrew and Greek and try to consistently reproduce the form of the original into English. Also, formal equivalent translations try to minimize the interpretation of the scholars while translating.

¹ Adapted from Andy Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology*, pg. 50-52.

² Adapted from Bill Mounce, “Is the Two-Fold Formal/Functional Sufficient?: Five, Not Two Basic Translation Theories” and from Andy Naselli, *How To Understand and Apply the New Testament*, pg. 52-57.

3. *Functional or Dynamic Equivalence*: This translation theory prioritizes reproducing the meaning of the original into English, even if this means losing some of the form of the original. In most cases, these translations will follow the form of the original when it makes sense in English, but when it doesn't, they will move to a more functional translation. Ultimately, their goal is to reproduce meaning, which means that an additional amount of interpretation is involved, which may be problematic. However, it does produce a more understandable translation, which is good.

4. *Natural Language*: This category is technically an extension of the prior one, however, the distinction is important. Natural language translations see no value in reproducing the original form, and thus exclusively focus on reproducing meaning. These translations attempt to convey the meaning in a way that will evoke the same response in the readers as the originals did. These translations introduce even more interpretation, and sometimes can introduce things that are not included in the original languages in order to achieve natural English style and readability.

5. *Paraphrases and Contemporary Relevance Versions*: Technically speaking, a paraphrase is a rewording of the original text for the purpose of simplification *in the same language*. So, this means that any version that is moving from Greek or Hebrew to English, no matter how dynamic it is, cannot be correctly called a paraphrase. However, it may be helpful to call these "contemporary relevance versions." These versions are going to so prioritize meaning, readability, and modernity, that they will remove essentially all cultural perspectives from the text in order to connect to the modern reader. These *should not* be called "Bibles," because at any point it is difficult to tell what is the Bible and what is the author's attempt to make the message of the Bible relevant to their own culture. There are extreme amounts of interpretation in these versions, and thus there is a real danger if the author is interpreting things wrongly. In this category are *The Message*, *The New Testament in Modern English*, the original *Living Bible*, and the *Passion Translation*.

III. Excursus: The Myth of a Literal Translation

A. It is extremely common for publishers, advertisements, and many Christians (both scholars and lay people) to refer to translations that are consistently more form based as "literal" or "word for word." However, this is extremely inaccurate and just not helpful. I believe that the word "literal" does not "literally" mean what we say it means, and by using this word, we are leading to confusion as to what a "literal translation" is, and more importantly, what it means for a translation to be accurate.

B. The basic meaning or sense of the word "literal" has to do with *meaning*, not *form*. All English dictionaries define the word as primarily meaning "without embellishment" or "free from exaggeration." Again, the emphasis of the word "literal" is in regards to the *meaning* being conveyed, not the *form*. Thus, a "literal" translation is one that is primarily faithful to the *meaning* of the author, not the *form*.

C. Some dictionaries offer "word-for-word" or "verbatim" as a secondary and less common definition of the word literal. But if this is what we mean when we use the word in regards to translations, then no translation qualifies as literal, not even an interlinear!

1. Bill Mounce provides a helpful example: "Take something as simple as τοῦ Θεοῦ. What is its literal translation? "Of God?" First of all, we do not have a genitive case in English, and so we must turn a foreign grammatical construction into a prepositional phrase, "of God." Secondly, not translation would write "the God" but simply "God" since we know the article is functioning in Greek as a part of a proper name, which we

don't do in English. And then of course we have to capitalize, "God," So how is it "literal" to translate τοῦ Θεοῦ as "of God?"

D. If all scholars did was translate words, a "literal" translation would produce nothing but meaningless phrases. In fact, no one should even desire a "literal" translation in this sense, because if we followed this definition, we would be reading an interlinear not a translation!

1. For example, this is what we would read for John 3:16—"in this way for he loved the god the world so that the son the only he gave in order that each the believing into him not he perish but he has life eternal."

2. Bill Mounce says, "These are the English words that "literally" represent the Greek words. But no one thinks this is translation, so why would someone ask for a "literal translation of the Bible? Any publisher that advertises their Bible is a "literal" translation should only be selling interlinears. My point is simply this: We miscommunicate when we claim a literal translation goes word-for-word when in fact there is a not a single verse in the Bible where they actually do."

E. Some argue that a very formal translation is important because they reflect the underlying Hebrew or Greek structure. However, English is so different from both of these languages, that even the most formal translations diverge from the underlying structure quite frequently. This would then confuse someone who doesn't actually know the original languages, because they might think they are reading a translation that is following the original structure, when in reality, the passage they are reading is not following the structure.

1. Certainly, formal translations are needed and have their place, but we must not believe the lie that a certain translation is always going to copy the form of the original.

And besides, if you know Hebrew or Greek well enough to gain insight from the original structure, then why not read the Bible in Hebrew or Greek?

F. It is also important to realize that words themselves do not have "literal" meanings. Instead, each word has what is called a "semantic range." Bill Mounce illustrates this by saying that each word has a bundle of sticks, with each stick representing a different (but perhaps related) meaning. One of the sticks may certainly be larger than the rest, representing the core idea of the word, or what might be called the "gloss," which is what someone who is a learning a language would memorize. But in reality, the "gloss" is just one meaning among many.

1. Take for example the word "key." What does "key" literally mean? Well, there is no "literal" meaning of the word "key!" It has no core meaning; There is no big stick in its bundle. "Did you lose your key?" "What is the key to the puzzle?" "What is the key point" "What key is that song in?" "Press the A key" "He shoots best from the key" "I first ate key lime pie in Key West in the Florida Keys."

G. Because words do not have "literal" meanings, a word-for-word translation is unrealistic. Meaning is not conveyed by single words, but instead is conveyed through groups of words, sentences, and paragraphs which are bound together by grammar and understood within a particular context. Therefore, meaning requires a context larger than an individual word, and accuracy has to do with meaning, not with form.

H. Even in translations that are more formal, such as the ESV and NASB, there are times where dynamic translations are absolutely necessary. Sometimes, these translations end up translating a passage more dynamically than a consistently functional translation like the NIV! It is important to see translations as on a spectrum, not just fixed in one place. The translation method varies from passage to passage, and book to book.

I. As we will look at later, there are even more difficulties when trying to translate metaphors and idioms "literally."

J. So, I hope this shows that there is no such thing as “literal” or “word for word” translation, and that even if there was, you would not want one! We must understand that a true “literal” translation, in the most common sense of the word, is one that conveys the meaning of the original words into the receptor language without exaggeration or embellishment.

IV. Why New and Updated Translations are Necessary

A. *Manuscript Discoveries*: One of the major reasons new translations are needed is that we are continually finding more and more manuscripts. For example, in the late 1940s we found the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were a massive discovery for Old Testament scholarship. All the findings from these manuscripts have just recently been released, and newer translations are able to take into account their findings.

B. *Better Knowledge of Hebrew and Greek*: Another important reason is that our knowledge of the Biblical languages is constantly growing. We know way more about ancient Hebrew today than we did during the 1600s. For instance, there are places where the translators of the KJV simply did not know what a Hebrew word meant, so they just transliterated it and called it good. Today, we know a lot more and can solve that problem.

C. *Changes in English*: Also, the English language is constantly changing and growing. This means that new translations are necessary. If you read the 1611 KJV, it doesn't make much sense, even though it was written in English. This is because the English language has changed so much! A good example of this is in regards to gender in translation, which we will talk about later.

D. *Different Reading Levels*: Different translations are necessary for different groups of people. For example, an adult probably won't be reading the same translation as a child, or a native English speaker might need a different translation than someone who is learning English as a second language.

E. *Different Uses*: There are also different uses for Bibles, and hence different translations are required to fulfil these needs. For example, you might use a different translation for personal study than you would for public reading in the church.

V. Pros of Each Theory

A. *“Literal” or “Word for Word”*: Interlinears are helpful for viewing the structure and word order of the original language when studying a passage or translating.

B. *Formal Equivalence*: These translations are less interpretive than others, and therefore the reader is less likely to be confused as to what the text says as opposed to what the text means. Also, a formal translation will favor ambiguity because the translators aren't interpreting as much, which can be helpful for studying and for the advanced student. These translations may be helpful for preaching or teaching from, since there is less need to correct the translation. Another plus is that readers will be able to pick up word patterns easier because this approach tries to translate the same Greek and Hebrew words with the same English words as much as possible. Lastly, it enables English readers to follow the argument better in Epistles because they more consistently render logical connectives such as “therefore,” “but,” or “for,” and also more consistently translates participles and other subordinate words and clauses as syntactically subordinate to the controlling verb and clause.

C. *Functional or Dynamic Equivalence*: The main benefit of a functional translation is that when it is done correctly, it is more accurate than a formal translation because it conveys the meaning better. This produces a more understandable translation, which is in fact the purpose of translation. Dynamic translations create readable Bibles that do not require a scholar or pastor to explain, except in some circumstances. Even the lay person can read the Word of God. Also, these translations may be more clear, because sometimes maintaining a more Hebrew or Greek

structure introduces ambiguity into the text that was not there in the original. Functional translations are appropriate for those without a high literary ability like children or poorly educated people.

D. *Natural Language*: These versions have the same benefits as functional equivalence translations, however, they are even easier to understand. By using natural English, these translations are understandable by the average reader, even those who are not educated in “Biblish” or “Christianese.”

E. *Paraphrases and Contemporary Relevance Versions*: These publications can be helpful for providing very simple summaries and explanations of the text to those who don’t understand, such as children or new believers. When rightly interpreted, these books offer the meaning of the text super clearly. By sacrificing historical accuracy, the text becomes culturally relevant.

VI. Cons of Each Theory

A. *“Literal” or “Word for Word”*: Interlinears are going to make no sense if read like an actual translation and will not convey meaning as well (or at all).

B. *Formal Equivalence*: Because formal translations attempt to follow the original structure and form, the text can occasionally be ambiguous and thus not as accurate as a translation that conveys the meaning. Also, because formal translation put so much emphasis on the gloss or one word, a translation can occasionally be misleading. By sticking to a more formal rendering into English, these translations often read very “woodenly” and occasionally make no sense. They can be very hard to follow for long periods of time, especially in narratives. The language of these translations often isn’t natural and understandable. As we saw earlier, there is no such thing as a “literal” or “word for word” translation, though these types of translations are often advertised as so, which is misleading. These translations may obscure the fact that ultimately it is the meaning of the text which is inspired and that must be conveyed as we translate.

C. *Functional or Dynamic Equivalence*: Because these translations focus more on meaning than form, they require more interpretation by the translators. This is good when they get it right but can introduce pollution to the text when they get it wrong. This is why it is important that there are footnotes with alternate readings. These translations often lose the benefits of a formal translation, such as the ability to follow repeated words and the logic of the argument in an epistle. Moreover, because this translation type is in a sense a mediating category, it may sometimes be hard to understand.

D. *Natural Language*: By completely abandoning the original form, these translations lose all the benefits of a formal translation. Furthermore, there is much more interpretation that is introduced, which may be dangerous, as ideas that are not included in the Greek or Hebrew may be introduced in order to make sense in natural English. Lastly, these versions may read so naturally that you cannot tell that though the Bible is God’s Word for us today, it is also an ancient book rooted in real history.

E. *Paraphrases and Contemporary Relevance Versions*: These books carry the same cons as the last group, however, to a greater extent. So much interpretation is introduced that there is extreme danger, especially when the interpretation is off. Often, these publications are the work of one author, and thus there are individual theological biases introduced to the text (i.e. The Message, the Passion Bible). At any given point, it is hard or even impossible to tell when you are reading the Bible and when you are reading the author’s comments. Again, these works should not be considered Bibles, and though they can be helpful in certain situations, should never be used for regular individual study, public reading of Scripture, or preaching.

VII. Difficulties in Translating the Bible

A. *Idioms*: An idiom is a group of words or a phrase where the meanings of individual words do not add up to the meaning of the phrase. Modern English is full of idioms, such as: “break a leg” = good luck; “a piece of cake” = an easy task; “an arm and a leg” = a great expense; “let the cat out of the bag” = prematurely share a secret; etc. Idioms are extremely difficult to translate, because if you translate them in a form-based way, you almost certainly won’t convey meaning, and you will confuse the readers.

1. For example, in Hebrew, God is often described as אָרְךָ אֶפְיֹם (see Ex. 34:6).

Translated formally, this says “Long of nose.” Wow! God has a long nose! Did you know that? In reality, this is a Hebrew idiom that means “slow to anger.” That is how the NIV translates this phrase.

B. *Metaphors and Similes*: A simile is a comparison using the words “like” or “as,” and a metaphor is a comparison without using those two words. When translating, it is often difficult to decide whether a metaphor should be translated in a form-based way or a meaning-based way. It is a judgement call, and all translations do some of both. Sometimes, a metaphor that is translated formally will make sense in the receptor language, sometimes it won’t.

1. Bill Mounce shared a story about a time where he was speaking in China, and he used the phrase “straddle the fence.” As soon as he said it, he realized he hadn’t seen any fences in China, and later asked the translator what she said. She had translated his metaphor as “a foot in two boats.”

2. Additionally difficulty is introduced when there are metaphors which carry theological meaning or significance. For example, almost all translations say that Jesus is the “Lamb of God” in John 1:29. But what if you were translating for a tribe that had never seen a lamb? What if the parallel animal in their culture was a pig? Should we call Jesus the “Swine of God?” That probably makes you cringe, because you know that mixing up pigs and sheep will confuse other themes in the Bible, especially ones like sacrifice and holiness. So sometimes a translator must leave the cultural distance and simply educate the readers.

C. *Euphemisms*: A euphemism is a mild or indirect word or expression that you substitute for one that might be too harsh or blunt when it refers to something unpleasant or embarrassing. For example, in English we say “I need to go to the bathroom” instead of “I need to defecate.”

1. In Hebrew and Greek, there are euphemisms that if translated formally, would not convey meaning. So instead, we must translate them in another way, either substituting an equivalent euphemism in English, or by simply conveying the meaning in English.

2. For example, Hebrew often uses the verb יָדַע to refer to sexual intercourse (see Gen. 4:1). The word in Hebrew is usually glossed as “to know.” Some translations keep this euphemism and say, for example, “Adam knew his wife Eve” (ESV). Others substitute a culturally equal euphemism, such as the NIV which says “Adam made love to his wife Eve.”

D. *Audience Appropriate/Dignified Translations*: The concept of euphemisms is also connected to that of creating an appropriate and dignified translation. As we mentioned earlier, one of the qualities of an excellent translation is that it is audience-appropriate. Especially for a church gathering or for reading with children, this becomes very important.

1. A good example is in 1 Samuel 20:30a, where Saul says to his son: בְּיָנֵעוֹת הַמְרִדוֹת. The NASB, ESV, NIV, and others translate this as “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!” The NET says, “You stupid traitor!” The NLT says, “You stupid son of a whore!” These are all fine translations, but a really culturally equivalent translation into English

that would carry the same meaning as the Hebrew would be “You stupid son of a b_____!” However, out of sensitivity to various readers and public settings, it is probably best not to translate it this way.

D. *Money, Weights, and Measures*: Because we use different measurements than people did in ancient times, we must ask how we should handle these terms in Scripture. Some translations decide to translate the Greek or Hebrew word into English, and then add a footnote with the modern equivalent. Others do the opposite.

F. *Gender in Translation*: This final difficulty is a major obstacle, and is especially relevant today. There are many different views on the subject, and the topic is often one of major argument. The question is in regards to how gender specific terms should be translated in Scripture. English is a changing language, and while the words “man” and “he” and “him” used to refer to a person in general, this is no longer the case. However, the languages of Hebrew and Greek use words that function like English used to, where a masculine word stands for a person in general. Because English is changing, many Bible translators are calling for language that accommodates these changes. Some people, however, believe that this should not be done, and argue that people who suggest it should be done are liberal, politically correct, and feminists.

1. The reality is, English has changed. Many people today do not hear “man” and “he” generically, and thus if we leave these words when we are talking about people in general, they will be confused and will not hear the message of the Bible. Bill Mounce shared a story of walking into his daughter’s bedroom and finding a Bible verse taped to her wall, but she had crossed out “he” and written “she.” She then asked her dad, “The Bible is for me too, and not just for my brother, isn’t it?”

2. Because the English language has changed, I believe translations should intentionally clarify gender. This leads to the approach of a “gender accurate translation.” When the original author was referring to men in specific, masculine terminology is used. When the author was referring to both men and women, inclusive language is used. This concept is in fact biblical, as there are times where a New Testament author quotes the Hebrew Bible in a gender inclusive way. For example. Romans 5:15 quoting Isaiah 52:7, 2 Corinthians 6:18 quoting 2 Samuel 7:14, etc.

3. What this does not mean is that a translation should seek to neutralize or remove all gender-specific references. This would be wrong, and is clearly unbiblical.

4. This whole process is very complicated, because often gender in language is very complex. For example, Hebrew and Greek both have gendered nouns, whereas English doesn’t. However, sometimes the gender of the noun does not match the biological gender. For example, the plural form of “fathers” in Hebrew is feminine, but this does not mean that all fathers are women. Also, in some efforts to change an originally singular word that is standing for both men and women, a translation that makes the word plural may change the original meaning.

5. Another special problem with languages that seek to accurately translate gender is in regards to passages that are originally referring to Jesus. For example, in some translations, Psalm 6:4-7 are changed from masculine singular nouns and verbs to neutral plural verbs. However, both in the context of the Psalms, and based off its quotation in Hebrews 2 and 1 Corinthians 15, this passage is clearly in reference to Jesus. So, changing the gender specific language changes the meaning.

6. Overall, updating Bible translations so that they conform to the standard use of English today is a good thing, as long as it can be done in a way that does not obscure or change the meaning of the original text.

VIII. What to Do Instead of Bickering Over Bible Translations

- A. *Regularly Benefit from the Strengths of Multiple Translations*: All translations have their strengths and weaknesses. By using multiple translations, we can get the best of all worlds.
- B. *Thank God for Good Bible Translators and Translations*: Bible translation is extremely difficult. In English, we are extremely blessed to have such a wide variety of good, evangelical translations. We should never take this for granted and should praise God for this, especially when there are millions of people who do not have this luxury.
- C. *Be Careful When You Criticize a Translation*: Again, Bible translation is so incredibly complicated, and is such a meticulous process, that we should be careful when criticizing. Especially when we know little to nothing about Hebrew or Greek and the process of translation, and we are talking about scholars who spent years translating a particular version!
- D. *Recognize How Similar English Translations Are*: Rather than focusing on how translations differ, recognize that they also share a lot in common. In fact, they are more similar than you might realize.
- E. *Understand that Different People Have Different Opinions*: This is not a topic of salvific importance. You aren't going to hell because you use the NIV, while someone else uses the ESV. Have respectful discussion, learn from those who disagree, and realize that though important, this issue should not separate Christians.

IX. Conclusion

- A. Suggested Translations (in order of most formal to most functional): NASB, ESV, NRSV, CSB, NIV, NET, NLT.
- B. As I have mentioned, it is extremely helpful to use multiple translations with multiple purposes. For instance, when I study, I use the ESV, however, when I am doing my daily reading I prefer the NIV. By using different translations, you can be sure that there is a consensus in meaning (not necessarily wording), which grants certainty that there has been no pollution that has occurred in meaning during the translation process from the Hebrew or Greek to English. Whether or not you have physical copies of all these translations, you can find them free online or on an app for your phone.
- C. We have so many good translations out there, you can be confident that you are reading the Word of God, and that the Bible you hold in your hands, whether it is the ESV, NIV, NLT, or CSB, is the inspired and authoritative Word of God.