

Translations and the Bible

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When God confused the languages at Babel, the communication barrier was so impenetrable that the people ceased building the tower ... **and their city**. God then scattered them “*over the face of the whole earth*” (Gen 11:8). This language confusion was a stupendous miracle. Brains were rewired into brand new languages ... instantaneously. But, this is just part of what occurred. Even memories were reprogrammed. Otherwise, a now “*foreign voice*” in one’s head would surely drive one mad ... and a person would also have lost all cumulative knowledge. Furthermore, it is highly probable that each one so changed thought they were speaking correctly - and everyone else was speaking ... babble.

But, Babel was just the initial confusion of the languages. Over the millennia, languages have continued to fracture - and some have even expired. Translators work to build bridges across these communication divides.

The Herculean Task

Translating from one language to another, in a contemporary setting, is a daunting task. Problems include vocabulary and syntax, and also literary devices possessed by each language (I’ll discuss some in Koine Greek below). But, all languages sport “*exceptions to the rules*” - along with peculiar “*figures of speech*” - and even slang.

But, ... what about translating **an extinct language** into a modern language? This, in my estimation, makes an already daunting task even more overwhelming. There is no *living speaker* with whom a translator can work. As you probably already know, the Bible was written in what are now extinct languages. Fortunately, because of the enduring interest in these documents, there is a trail of bread crumbs we can follow back through history as we seek to understand what these authors wrote (Incidentally, “*a trail of bread crumbs*” is a figure of speech that, if literally translated into some other language ... would likely be complete nonsense).

The Hebrew Scriptures

To give you an idea of the task facing the translator of Biblical Hebrew, consider this. Starting around 250 B.C., the Jews themselves realized the need to translate their Hebrew texts ... into Greek! And why was that? Well, after the Babylonian exile, ancient Hebrew faded and was replaced by Aramaic. They rightly knew that as time continued to pass it would be increasingly difficult for people to understand anything from that extinct language. But **Greek** had actually arisen as the more universal language. So, they translated the extinct Hebrew into Greek - and called it the Septuagint (or LXX). Supposedly, seventy translators undertook this project. But, as the entire work was not completed until about 150 B.C., it is clear there were many different translators - some *more learned* than others and some *more meticulous* than others.

Furthermore, they had no original (extant) documents to work from, so, they were working from copies. The chances of textual variants already being present is certain. We have the same situation as we work with New Testament texts. Furthermore, from our vantage point, not only is this Northwest Semitic Hebrew language still extinct (those two words are strange when put together), but **the Greek** of the Septuagint translators is also long gone. It predates the Koine Greek of the New Testament ... which is another extinct language. This really should not surprise anyone too much. All languages evolve - and history is littered with languages and dialects ... that have simply vanished.

The Greek Scriptures

It is here I want to share some examples of Koine Greek distinctives. Multiply these examples *by the thousands* ... and you will begin to get a feel for the translator's task.

Word Order

Koine Greek often uses word order as a tool to express emphasis. A literal translation of 2Timothy 3:1 would be more like: *"This but you must know, that in last days will stand in for themselves times ferocious."* This word order is quite awkward for us. For example, English normally places an adjective *just before* the noun it modifies (i.e., ferocious times). But, in this verse, the adjective (ferocious) is at the end of the sentence (in the predicate position) quite deliberately. Timothy was commanded to know, and expect, that the last times will be ... what? *Pleasant* times? *Peaceful* times? *Joyous* times? By holding this adjective back until the last possible moment - Koine Greek *"punches"* the reader. The entire thought is waiting ... for that adjective. This is a powerful literary device in Koine Greek. The faithful translator will grapple to convey such important subtleties when transferring this information from one language to another.

Personal Pronouns

Koine Greek also often uses personal pronouns for added emphasis. For example, all Koine Greek verbs already include person and number. So, *"eimi"* means *"I am."* But, *"ego eimi"* means, *"I, I am."* This duplication means, *"Don't miss this."* At the end of a heated exchange with the Pharisees, Jesus wanted to make sure His murderers-to-be did not miss this declaration: *"Truly, truly* (this duplication is yet another device of emphasis to arrest attention for this conclusion), *I am saying to all of you, before Abraham was generated - I, I am."* They clearly *"got"* the message. And how do I know that? *"Therefore, they picked up stones to throw at Him"* (Jn 8:58,59), and later said, *"You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God"* (Jn 10:33). What they did not *"get"* was this declaration ... was not blasphemy.

The Double Negative ... and Beyond!

I think I just committed a grievous error in the previous sentence. It has a double negative. In my checkered past, a church I once pastored chose not to "renew the contract" (a politically correct way of saying, "You're fired!"). One of the charges levied against me ... I used double negatives in my sermons. Interestingly, Koine Greek uses double negatives (and even a quintuple negative) - *for emphasis*. I wanted to say to my detractors, *"You know, if the Holy Spirit is okay using double negatives, you might want reconsider this charge."* But, being the benevolent, gentle soul that I am, I decided to let that go. In fact, I also let go charges of *"failing to attract and keep a crowd"* (after ten whole months), *"desecrating the sanctuary"* (by leaving props on the stage after a Vacation Bible School week), and *"using too many personal illustrations"* in my sermons. Oh well, ... such is life. By the way, here is the quintuple negative (which if you count the first part of the passage - a hextuple), *"Not cherishing silver the habit (of your life), being satisfied with the existing things, for He Himself has said, 'Not no you I might leave, nor not no you I might abandon'"* (Heb 13:5). God is emphatically saying to those He has committed Himself to - He is not going anywhere ... even if your contract is not renewed.

Compound Words

The verse just referenced demonstrates another Koine Greek literary device. Often words are intensified *by compounding them* - particularly with some preposition. The simple verb for

“abandon” is, “leipo.” But, in Hebrews 13:5 the word is, “egkataleipo.” In this instance, two prepositions are added, “en” and “kata.” This hyper intensified verb carries a sense of “utter abandonment” or an “absolute desertion.” Bottom line - as His child, you might “grieve Him” (Eph 4:30), “quench Him” (1Thes 5:19), or run to the desert or pig sty, but if you are His ... He will not be shaken off (1Cor 11:32, Heb 12:5-11).

There’s More

I could go on and on. Koine Greek has a Middle Voice available for verbs as well as a Perfect Tense. It also has a distinct Imperative Mood. All these things make Koine Greek very specific. But, it lacks punctuation, spaces, chapters, verses - some things that I think commend English translations. And our **bolding**, *italicizing* and underlining helps us express emphasis in our writing.

My point is to help you see that translating truly is ... a science ... and an art. This is an overused phrase, but it is accurate. The primary goal of a Bible translator is to pick a group and bring God’s word to them **in terms they understand** - while being totally faithful to the original author’s intent. If they are worth their salt, they will succeed in doing this for a contemporary audience that is of a different age, language and culture than the Bible’s authors. This is not easy. And all societies even have subcultures who communicate uniquely.

Conclusion ... Sort Of

The documents that form the Bible are continuously studied and scrutinized. As more archeological finds are discovered, **and** further breakthroughs in vocabulary and syntax are made on these ancient languages (oftentimes through comparative studies), **and** as long as contemporary languages keep evolving ... the work of the translator will never end. Praise God for the good ones - the honest ones - the rightly learned ones. They have helped me in my journey ... and continue to do so.

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