

Why the *English Standard Version* (ESV) Should not become the Standard English Version¹

How to make a good translation much better

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I need to say first of all that I like the *English Standard Version* (ESV). After all, the ESV is a moderate revision (about 6% I believe) of the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV, 1952), which itself was done by competent scholars. Like the *New Revised Standard Version* (also a revision of the RSV), the ESV generally makes good exegetical decisions. Both the ESV and NRSV also significantly improve the gender language of the RSV.²

So I like the ESV. I am writing this article, however, because I have heard a number of Christian leaders claim that the ESV is the “Bible of the future”—ideal for public worship and private reading, appropriate for adults, youth and children. This puzzles me, since the ESV seems to me to be overly literal—full of archaisms, awkward language, obscure idioms, irregular word order, and a great deal of “Biblish.” Biblish is produced when the translator tries to reproduce the *form* of the Greek or Hebrew without due consideration for how people actually write or speak. The ESV, like other formal equivalent versions (RSV, NASB, NKJV, NRSV), is a good supplement to versions that use normal English, but is not suitable as a standard reading Bible for the church. This is because the ESV too often fails the test of “standard English.”

This paper is a constructive critique of the ESV and an encouragement for its committee to make a good translation much better by doing a thorough review and revision of its English style and idiom. Critical questions we will ask include: (1) Does this translation make sense? (2) If comprehensible, is it obscure, awkward or non-standard English? Would anyone speaking or writing English actually say this?

A few clarifications are in order. First, as a Greek professor and a Bible translator, I am a strong advocate for using multiple Bible versions, especially those from across the translation spectrum. Both functional equivalent (idiomatic) and formal equivalent (literal) versions have strengths and weaknesses, and both are useful tools for students of the Word. Functional equivalent versions (NLT, NCV, TEV, CEV, GW, etc.) are helpful for communicating clearly, naturally and accurately the meaning of the text. Formal equivalent versions (KJV, NKJV, NASB, RSV, ESV, NRSV, etc.) help to reproduce formal features of a language like metaphors, idioms, word-plays, allusions, ambiguities and structural markers. Mediating versions, which lie somewhere in the middle (NIV, [H]CSB, NET, NAB, NJB, REB, ISV, CEB), are a nice balance, retaining more formal features than functional equivalent versions but with more clarity than literal ones. I have addressed these issues in depth elsewhere and will not repeat them here.³ Concerning my personal experience, I have served on three translation committees and have consulted for a fourth.⁴ My desire is for all English versions to reproduce clearly and accurately the meaning and message of God’s Word.

¹ This paper was originally given on November 20, 2008 at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Providence, RI.

² See discussion below under gender-language.

³ See Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), *passim*.

⁴ I served on a revision committee for the *New Century Version* (NCV) and presently serve on the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) for the NIV, and on an editorial team for the Expanded Bible (Thomas Nelson). I have also done consulting work for the *New Living Translation* (NLT).

It will become obvious from the examples below that the ESV's problems with clarity and fluidity are primarily related to its overly literal translation policy. For real-life translators around the world—whether in the jungles of Irian Jaya or in the halls of the United Nations—the best translation is not a literal one, but one that reproduces the *meaning* of the text in clear, accurate and idiomatic language.

One anecdote may be helpful here. As I was reading through the ESV (in conjunction with another project), I came to the epistle to the Hebrews. Hebrews contains some of the finest literary Greek in the New Testament and can be a very difficult book for my Greek students. I expected to encounter substantial problems in the ESV. Instead, I found that the ESV was quite well translated in Hebrews, with fewer of the kinds of problems I was encountering elsewhere. Then the reason dawned on me. The fine literary Greek of Hebrews—with radically different word order, grammar and idiom—is simply impossible to translate literally into English. To do so produces gibberish. Ironically, the ESV was at its best when it *abandoned* its “essentially literal” strategy and translated the meaning of the text into normal English. It is ironic that the ESV's main marketing slogan—an “essentially literal” translation—is what makes it deficient as a standard reading Bible for the church.

Method

I have divided these ESV problems into eleven broad categories: (1) “oops” translations, (2) idioms missed, (3) lexical problems, (4) exegetical errors, (5) collocational clashes, (6) archaisms, (7) inconsistent gender-language, (8) awkward and unnatural style, (9) word-order problems, (10) run-on sentences, and (11) mistranslated genitives.

For most categories, I will note the ESV rendering and then compare it to at least two other versions that use more standard English. One of these will always be the NIV (2011), which will serve as a “control” text. This is to avoid the criticism that I am selectively choosing whichever version happens to improve upon the ESV. Sometimes, in fact, I will criticize both the ESV and the NIV.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg, a small sampling that I have come across rather incidentally during work on other projects.⁵ I hope this will stimulate a more thorough analysis of English style and clarity *for all English Bible versions*. Sadly, English Bible translators have an unfortunate tendency to sacrifice comprehension and clarity in a misguided attempt at “literal accuracy”—an oxymoron, more often than not.

“Oops” Translations in the ESV

We can start on a more lighthearted note. Occasionally translators will render a text “literally” without realizing the potential for misunderstanding or double meaning. All versions must watch out for this, but literal ones are particularly susceptible. For example, the ESV (following the RSV) originally rendered Gen. 30:35, “But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped ...and put them in charge of his sons.” It is remarkable that Laban had so much confidence in his goats! This gaffe was pointed out and a second printing of the ESV corrected it, taking authority away from Laban's goats: “... and put them in the charge of his sons.” Here are a few more “oops” translations that I have found in the ESV.

“Grinding Together”?!

Luke 17:35 **ESV** “There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.”

Comment: In contemporary English, “grinding together” suggests seductive dancing or something worse. (Perhaps *both* should have been taken for judgment!) Most versions clarify that this means grinding “grain,” “meal” or “flour” (cf. NIV, NIV, NLT, HCSB, NET, NRSV, REB, etc.)

⁵ I have also gleaned examples from lists produced by others, especially Wycliffe translator and linguist Wayne Leman, who blogs about improving Bible versions at <https://betterbibles.wordpress.com/>. For additional examples see his lists at <http://bible-translation.110mb.com/esvlinks.htm#problems>.

Rock badgers are people too!

Prov. 30:26 **ESV** “the ants are a people not strong, yet they provide their food in the summer; rock badgers are a people not mighty, yet they make their homes in the cliffs;”

Comment: In addition to the tortured word order, the ESV’s use of “people” is very strange. We sometimes joke that animals are people too, but surely ants and rock badgers are “creatures” or “species,” not people.

Nice legs!

Ps. 147:10 **ESV** “His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,”

Comment: Taking pleasure in a man’s legs will surely leave readers chuckling. NIV reads “in the legs of the warrior”; NET has “by the warrior’s strong legs.”

*Such clean teeth!***Amos 4:6**

ESV “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities”

Comment: It sounds like God is distributing toothbrushes to the Israelites. The Hebrew idiom means they had nothing to eat. The NIV reads “I gave you empty stomachs,”; HCSB: “I gave you absolutely nothing to eat.” NET: “I gave you no food to eat.”

Trembling loins?

Psalms 69:23 **ESV** Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually.

Comment: This translation will surely send twitters through the junior high group. Trembling loins sounds like someone has to go to the bathroom.

“Double-tongued” deacons?

1 Tim. 3:8 **ESV** Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain

Comment: Sounds like a mock “Indian-speak” (with forked-tongue) or some strange alien creature. The Greek is *dilogoi* (etymologically, “two words/messages”), which means “insincere,” “lacking integrity,” “hypocritical,” or even “two-faced” (NET, GW).

Keep that faith to yourself!

Rom. 14:22 **ESV** The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.

Comment: The ESV seems to be discouraging believers from sharing their faith. But the word *pistis* here refers to personal *convictions* about food and drink, not about saving faith.⁶

NIV So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.

REB If you have some firm conviction, keep it between yourself and God.

Showing off the flesh

Gal. 6:12 **ESV** It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised. . . .

Comment: “A good showing in the flesh” sounds like a bikini contest.

Ruth the mother of Boaz?

Ruth 4:14-15 **ESV** Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, Who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be Renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.”

Comment: The only antecedent to “him” is Boaz. It sounds like Ruth gave birth to her husband Boaz.

⁶ D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 861 notes that here, “‘faith’ does not refer to general Christian faith but to *convictions* about the issues in dispute in Rome that arise out of one’s faith in Christ.”

*Planting ears?***Psalm 94:9**

ESV He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?

Comment: “Planting an ear” sounds like an agricultural metaphor. The Hebrew *nata* in this context means “formed,” or “fashioned.”

NIV Does he who fashioned the ear not hear?...

NET Does the one who makes the human ear not hear?

Watch out for falling lots!

Acts 1:26 ESV And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias...

Comment: One hopes Matthias was not hurt when the lot fell on him. The NIV has “the lot fell to Matthias.” The NET has “the one chosen was Matthias.”

Israel's gender confusion

Hosea 8:14 ESV For Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces, and Judah has multiplied fortified cities; so I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour her strongholds.

Comment: Readers will probably wonder why *he* gets the cities and *she* gets the strongholds.

Comforted or not?

Acts 20:12 ESV And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.

Comment: “Not a little comforted” sounds like they were not comforted in the least by Eutychus’ recovery. The meaning of course is the opposite: they were greatly comforted. The Greek *litotes* is unclear in English.

NIV: ...and were greatly comforted.

REB: ...greatly relieved that he was alive.

A man without a city

Acts 21:39 ESV Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.”

Comment: Paul sounds like a man without a city. **NIV** is only slightly better (“a citizen of no ordinary city”). **NLT** captures the sense: “Tarsus in Cilicia, which is an important city.”

Oh man!

Rom. 2:1 ESV Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.

Comment: In contemporary English, “Oh man!” is an exclamation, not a vocative. It sounds like Paul is saying, “Oh man, are you in trouble!” which of course is something like what he means (!), but not what the ESV intended. Even a literal version like the NASB recognizes the potential misunderstanding of the vocative, translating, “Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment.”

Idioms Missed in the ESV

Almost all the problem translations cited in this paper could be called “idioms missed,” since most literalist errors result from idiomatic differences between languages. Here we focus on phrases or clauses that the ESV has tried to render literally, resulting in awkward, nonsensical or inaccurate English.

Mark 1:2 (pars. Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:27)

ESV: “Behold, I send my messenger before your face”

Comment: The Greek idiom *pro prosōpou sou* (lit. “before your face”) means “ahead of you.” I would never say, “I arrived at the restaurant before your face.” Most versions recognize the idiom and translate accurately (HCSB, NET, NIV, NAB, NLT, REB, GNT, GW). While the original NASB used “before your face,” its 1995 update (NASU) recognized the idiom and corrected it to “ahead of you.” The NRSV

similarly revised the RSV. Curiously, the ESV misses the idiom here (and parallels), but gets it right in Luke 9:52 and 10:1, where *pro prosōpou autou* is translated “ahead of him.”

NIV: “I will send my messenger ahead of you.”

NASU: “Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you.”

Luke 22:3

ESV Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve.

Comment: This is not English. The Greek idiom means “one of the Twelve”

NIV Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve.

NET Then Satan entered Judas, the one called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve.

Luke 2:36

ESV Anna... was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin.

Comment: The Greek idiom (lit.) “advanced in many days” means “very old.” The idiom “from her virginity” means “after she was married.” This illustrates one of the common mistakes made by literalist translators. They suppose that by reproducing a few words from the idiom (“advanced” and “virginity”), you get closer to the meaning. But it is *the whole idiom* that carries the meaning, not random words.

NIV She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage.

HCSB She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage.

Acts 22:22

ESV Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

Comment: This is another example of misguided literalism. The ESV has tried to translate the Greek idiom, “take up from the earth such a one,” literally. By leaving a few words intact (“such,” “from the earth”), the ESV supposes it has retained the meaning.⁷ But of course no one speaking English would ever say this.

NIV ... “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!”

HCSB ... “Wipe this person off the earth—it’s a disgrace for him to live!”

Matt. 5:2 (cf. Acts 8:35)

ESV And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

Comment: The ESV has missed the Greek idiom, which does not indicate two actions, but one—an introduction to a speech. No one speaking English would say, “The teacher opened her mouth and taught the students, saying...”

NIV and he began to teach them. He said... (cf. NET, HCSB, etc.)

Genesis 27:37 (and 61 times)

ESV Isaac answered and said to Esau.

Comment: Again, no English speaker would say “the teacher answered and said to me,” but rather she “answered” or “replied.” The Hebrew (and Greek) idiom does not describe two actions but one. All of the functional equivalent versions (GNT, CEV, GW, NCV, NLT) and the mediating ones (NIV, NIV, HCSB, NET, NAB) recognize the idiom and translate it correctly as “answered,” or “replied.” While the original NASB used “answered and said” 186 times in the Old and New Testaments, its revision (NASU) uses it only 75 times, usually replacing it with “replied.” The revisers evidently recognized that this was a Hebrew idiom not an English one. Strangely, while the RSV correctly interpreted the idiom as “answered” in all but seven instances, its revision the ESV reintroduced “answered and said” sixty-one times in the Old Testament (but never in the New Testament!).

NIV Isaac answered Esau.

NET, NJB, NASU Isaac replied to Esau

⁷ Even the NIV and HCSB feel the need to retain the word “earth.” But the Greek idiom may well mean simply “kill him!” without the reader consciously thinking about departure from the earth (see NLT, REB, TEV, CEV).

Acts 8:23

ESV For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.

Comment: The “gall of bitterness” is a Greek idiom that means bitterly resentful or envious. Very few English readers have any idea what “gall” is. The translation “bile of bitterness” might be better but is still obscure and inaccurate, since this was likely a dead metaphor by the first century. The second phrase “bond of iniquity” is also obscure and archaic.

NIV For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.

NET For I see that you are bitterly envious and in bondage to sin.

Acts 9:28 (cf. Acts 1:21)

ESV So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly.

Comment: The ESV phrase is very strange, and certainly not standard English. The Greek idiom “going in and going out” means going around the city with them, with the implications that this was done in the open.

NIV So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem...

NET So he was staying with them, associating openly with them...

1 Cor. 9:16

ESV “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me.”

Comment: “For necessity is laid upon me” is not English. The Greek idiom indicates compulsion.

NIV “For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach.”

NLT “Yet preaching the Good News is not something I can boast about. I am compelled by God to do it.”

Phil. 4:11

ESV “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

Comment: The ESV misses the point. Paul is not saying that he is not *speaking* about being in need (he is speaking about it!). He is saying, he is not *in need*. This is a mistranslation of the Greek idiom, “speak according to lack/need.”

NIV I am not saying this because I am in need...

NJB I do not say this because I have lacked anything...

Phil. 4:12

ESV “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound.”

Comment: Paul doesn’t mean he knows *how* to be brought low, but rather he knows what it is like and how to get along while living in poverty. Other literal versions have gotten the idiom right. NASB: “I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity.” NRSV: “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.”

NIV “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.”

NLT “I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything.”

Matt. 23:32

ESV “Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.”

Comment: Nonsensical English. NIV, NLT, REB and NJB get the idiom right.

NIV “Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!”

REB “Go on then, finish off what your fathers began!” (cf. NLT, NJB)

Rom. 9:7

ESV “and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’”

Comment: The ESV misses the point. This is not about “naming” offspring. The Greek idiom (lit.), “in Isaac seed will be called for you,” means “Your name will be carried on through Isaac” (see REB) or simply “Your descendants will come through Isaac.”

NIV “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.”

REB “It is through the line of Isaac’s descendants that your name will be traced.”

2 Cor. 6:12

ESV “You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.”

Comment: Paul’s point is that he has not held back his affection toward the Corinthians, but they have held theirs back from him. ESV misses this and sounds like Paul is freeing the Corinthians from some restrictions. The second clause in the ESV is simply obscure. What does “restricted” in your emotions mean?

NIV “We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.”

NLT² “There is no lack of love on our part, but you have withheld your love from us.”

Joshua 10:6

ESV “the men of Gibeon [said], ‘Do not relax your hand from your servants.’”

Comment: The ESV has simply missed the idiom (by following the RSV). The ESV’s “Do not relax your hand” is obscure, but would probably be misunderstood as “Don’t stop putting pressure on.” In fact, the idiom means “don’t abandon” (HCSB, NRSV, NET, etc.) or “don’t forsake” (NKJV).

NIV “... ‘Do not abandon your servants.’”

NASU “... ‘Do not abandon your servants.’” (cf. HCSB, NRSV, NET, NKJV)

2 Sam. 18:25

ESV the king said, “If he is alone, there is news in his mouth.”

Comment: This is not an English idiom. I would never say, “Here comes Johnny with news in his mouth.”

NIV The king said, “If he is alone, he must have good news.”

NET The king said, “If he is by himself, he brings good news.”

Ps. 12:2

ESV with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.

Comment: The Hebrew idiom is “with a heart and a heart,” which means with deceptive hearts. Nobody speaking English would say they speak “with a double heart.”

NIV they flatter with their lips but harbor deception in their hearts.

HCSB they speak with flattering lips and deceptive hearts.

Isaiah 6:10

ESV Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy,

Comment: What are “heavy ears”? The Hebrew idiom means deaf or hard of hearing. The NIV is only slightly better. HCSB and NLT capture the sense.

NIV ...make their ears dull

HCSB ...deafen their ears.

NLT² ...plug their ears (cf. GW)

Isaiah 22:17

ESV “... the LORD... will seize firm hold on you”

Comment: “Seize firm hold on” is very strange English.

NIV “...the LORD is about to take firm hold of you”

NASU “...the LORD is about to grasp you firmly.”

Jer. 12:2

ESV “the wicked... you are near in their mouth and far from their heart.”

Comment: The ESV’s “near in their mouth” is nonsensical. The NET is clearest.

NIV “... You are always on their lips but far from their hearts.”

NET “...They always talk about you, but they really care nothing about you.

Matt. 20:12

ESV “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

Comment: “Borne the burden of the day” is not an English idiom.

NIV “...who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day

NLT “...who worked all day in the scorching heat.”

Acts 24:22

ESV But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.”

Comment: The ESV has missed the Greek idiom, which doesn’t mean to put someone off, but to formally adjourn or postpone a legal hearing (see NIV, HCSB, NRSV, REB, NLT, etc., and the commentaries).

NIV “Then Felix...adjourned the proceedings....”

HCSB “Felix ...adjourned the hearing...”

2 Cor. 6:15

ESV What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?

Comment: The Greek literally says “what part/share a believer with an unbeliever,” which means “what do they have in common?” The ESV makes it sound like the two are splitting a piece of pie. Also, “accord” is awkward. Better English is “agreement” or “harmony.”

NIV What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

NET And what agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share in common with an unbeliever?

Luke 7:1

ESV After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people,

Comment: Both phrases “all his sayings” and “in the hearing of the people” are strange and awkward English. No one would ever say, “The politician finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people.”

NIV When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening,

NLT² When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people,

Acts 1:17

ESV For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.

Comment: Both phrases in the ESV are unnatural English. “Numbered among us” means he was considered to be one of us. “Allotted his share” means he participated with us. It is not standard English to say, “The youth pastor was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

NIV He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”

NLT² Judas was one of us and shared in the ministry with us.

Acts 5:36

ESV For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody...

Comment: The Greek idiom “before these days” means “some time ago.” No one speaking English would say, “I visited my brother before these days.”

NIV Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody

NET For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody,

Acts 7:23

ESV “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel.

Comment: “It came into his heart” is not an English idiom. I would never say, “It came to my heart to visit my brother.” The Greek (lit.) “it rose up into his heart” means either “it occurred to him” (REB) or “he decided” (NIV).

NIV “...he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites.” (cf. HCSB)

REB “...when it occurred to him to visit his fellow-countrymen the Israelites.”

Ephesians 2:10

ESV “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Comment: In English I would never say I’m going to “walk in good works.” The Greek idiom “walk in” in many contexts has lost any pedestrian connotations and means to live by certain standards. This is clearly a matter of “doing” the good works that God prepared for us.

NIV “...which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

NET “...that God prepared beforehand so we may do them.”

NRSV “...which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Colossians 4:5

ESV “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders.”

Comment: To “walk...toward” someone in English can only mean literally to walk in that direction. The Greek *peripateō* (live; walk) is surely a dead metaphor here, as even other literal versions recognize (see NASB below). NRSV reads, “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders.” This question of “walking” in terms of conduct is a difficult one in translation. Sometimes the idiom may be a live metaphor, envisioning a traveler on life’s journey. In other cases (as the two cited above), it is clearly a dead metaphor. Translators must be particularly sensitive to contextual factors. It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey the data, but this metaphor would probably be worth a dissertation.

NIV “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders;”

NASB “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders.”

1 Thess. 4:12

ESV so that you may walk properly before outsiders...

NIV so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders...

NAB that you may conduct yourselves properly toward outsiders...

1 Samuel 10:9

ESV When he [Saul] turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart.

Comment: To give someone a new heart in English means a heart transplant. The point here is a change of heart or transformed disposition.

NIV ...God changed Saul’s heart. (cf. NASU)

God’s Word ...God changed Saul’s attitude.

Esther 1:14

ESV “the seven princes of Persia and Media who saw the king’s face.”

Comment: The idiom here refers to close advisors with special access, not the literal act of seeing someone’s face.

NIV the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king.”

NRSV the seven officials of Persia and Media, who had access to the king.”

Esther 2:21

ESV “two of the king’s eunuchs...sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.”

Comment: The Hebrew idiom (lit.) “sought to send a hand” means to conspire to seize or to kill. Here is another example where the translators assumed that retaining a few words from the idiom would preserve the meaning. But idioms work as a whole, not through their individual parts.

NIV...conspired to assassinate... (cf. NRSV)

HCSB... tried to assassinate

Psalm 10:4

ESV In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him”

Comment: “The pride of his face” is strange English. The Hebrew idiom refers to a prideful attitude.

NIV In his pride the wicked man does not seek him;

NET The wicked in their pride do not seek God;

Psalm 11:6

ESV “a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.”

Comment: “The portion of their cup” is nonsensical for most English readers. The idiom means “their lot” or “what they deserve.” It was certainly a dead metaphor.

NIV “a scorching wind will be their lot.”

NET “A whirlwind is what they deserve!”

Jer. 12:11

ESV The whole land is made desolate, but no man lays it to heart.

Comment: “No man lays it to heart” is not an English idiom.

NIV ...because there is no one who cares.

NET ...But no one living in it will pay any heed.

Jer. 12:6

ESV For even your brothers...have dealt treacherously with you; they are in full cry after you;

Comment: The Hebrew idiom, “called after you fully” probably means to raise their voices in anger or to cry out against.

NIV they have raised a loud cry against you.

NET Even they have plotted to do away with you.

Ex. 13:2

ESV Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel.

Comment: “First to open the womb” is not a normal English way to speak of a firstborn. The NIV is only a little better, retaining the odd “of every womb.” The NLT is the closest to contemporary English.

NIV The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites.

NLT² every firstborn among the Israelites.

Deut. 15:7

ESV you should not...shut your hand from your poor brother.

Comment: Not an English idiom.

NIV do not be...tightfisted toward them.

HCSB you must not be ...tightfisted toward your poor brother.

1 Kings 2:10

ESV Then David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David.

Comment: The Hebrew idiom is actually “David lay down (*shkv*) with his ancestors,” which would certainly be better than the contemporary connotations associated with “slept with.”

NIV Then David rested with his ancestors...

NET Then David passed away...

Rom. 8:37

ESV No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Comment: The verb *hupernikaō* does not mean “more than” conquerors (how can you be more than the winner?), but that we conquer *completely* or *overwhelmingly*. Absolute victory is ours. The NIV has the same problem. The NET and NLT get it right.

NIV ...we are more than conquerors...

NET ...we have complete victory...

NLT ...overwhelming victory is ours...

Matt. 27:1

ESV all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.

Comment: “Took counsel against” is unnatural English. The NASU’s “conferred together” is a higher register than the NIV’s “made their plans,” but both are normal English.

NIV ...made their plans how to have Jesus executed.

NASU ...conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death

ESV Lexical Errors and Problems

One of the more common errors of literal versions is the attempt to use only one English word for every Greek or Hebrew word. This error—common also to first year Greek students!—fails to recognize the semantic range of words. Here are a some examples in the ESV.

Gal. 5:14

ESV For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Comment The ESV’s “one word” is actually seven in English and six in Greek. Greek *logos* has a large semantic range (it doesn’t *literally* mean “word”!). Here it clearly means “statement” or “command.”

NIV For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command...

HCSB For the entire law is fulfilled in one statement:

1 Cor. 1:18

ESV For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Comment The “word” here means the “message” of the cross. Even NJKV gets it right (“message”; cf. NRSV). In other places the ESV translates *logos* as “message” (Mark 16:20). In 2 Cor. 5:19, *logos* is the “message” of reconciliation (cf. Heb. 2:2).

NIV For the message of the cross is foolishness...

NET For the message about the cross is foolishness...

Matt. 22:36

ESV “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

Comment: Commentators agree that *megalē* is a Semitism for the superlative “greatest.”⁸

NIV “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

NRSV “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Luke 18:34

ESV But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

Comment: The saying was not hidden (Jesus just said it!). The *meaning* was hidden. ESV has not recognized that *rhēma* here refers to the meaning of the saying, not the saying itself.

NIV ...Its meaning was hidden from them,

REB ...its meaning was concealed from them.

Acts 14:15

ESV “We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God,

⁸ See D. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC 33A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), and D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary* (vol. 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 464.

Comment: “Vain” in contemporary English means “related to pride or vanity,” but the Greek *mataios* here means “worthless” or “of no value.” Of course “of like nature with you” is also unnatural English, something no one speaking or writing English would actually say.

NIV We too are only human, like you...turn from these worthless things to the living God,

NRSV We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God,

Phil. 3:1

ESV To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

Comment: The ESV makes it sound like this is an issue of personal protection. The meaning is a safeguard, an extra source of spiritual protection.

NIV ... and it is a safeguard for you.

NRSV ...and for you it is a safeguard.

2 Tim. 1:15

ESV You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes.

Comment Multiple problems here. “Turned away from” is not quite right. The phrase means “deserted.” “Among whom are” is very awkward English. Standard English is “including.” Finally, contemporary English readers will consider Asia to be the continent, rather than the Roman province. The NIV corrects all of these:

NIV “You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.”

NLT² As you know, everyone from the province of Asia has deserted me—even Phygelus and Hermogenes.

2 Thess. 3:8

ESV ...nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it...

Comment: Greek *artos* does not always mean “bread,” but “any kind of food or nourishment” (BDAG). The meaning here is clearly “food.”⁹

NIV ...nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it.

NET ...and we did not eat anyone’s food without paying.

1Tim. 5:11-12

ESV But refuse to enroll younger widows, for...they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith.

Comment: *Pistis* doesn’t mean “faith” here, but a pledge made to the Lord (BDAG). The ESV sounds like the widows’ remarriage results in apostasy.

NIV ...they have broken their first pledge.

NRSV ...having violated their first pledge.

Rom. 11:25

ESV the fullness of the Gentiles

Comment: “Fullness of...” is very strange English. The meaning is the complete number of Gentiles.

NIV the full number of Gentiles

HCSB the full number of the Gentiles

1Pet. 3:2

ESV ...when they [unbelieving husbands] see your respectful and pure conduct.

Comment: The phrase (lit.) “your pure conduct in fear,” certainly refers to reverence to God, not “respect” for husbands.

⁹ Interestingly, a few verses later, the same expression is translated idiomatically in the ESV: “...to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (lit. “eat their own bread/food”).

NIV ...when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. (cf. NET, NRSV, NLT, NJB, HCSB, etc.)

Matt. 8:28

ESV And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes...

Comment There is no “country,” of the Gadarenes. This is a region or territory associated with the Gadarenes.

NIV ...region of the Gadarenes (cf. NET, NLT, etc.)

Matt. 2:23

ESV And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth...

Comment: The village of Nazareth could hardly be classified as a “city,” either by ancient or modern standards. *Polis* here means town or village.

NIV ...town called Nazareth... (cf. NRSV, NET, NLT, REB, HCSB, etc.)

Luke 21:14

ESV Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer,

Comment: The disciples are commanded not to “meditate” beforehand? One would think prayer and meditation would be a good idea before facing a trial for Christ. The sense seems to be to prepare or rehearse (BDF §392.2).

NIV “worry beforehand”; **NET** “rehearse ahead of time”; **NASB** “prepare beforehand”

Luke 24:37

ESV But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit.

Comment: *Pneuma* here probably means a “ghost,” a disembodied person, rather than a good or evil spirit.

NIV thinking they saw a ghost. (Cf. NET, NRSV, HCSB, NLT, etc.)

Acts 7:19, 21

ESV “He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants ... (v. 21) and when he [Moses] was exposed, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him...”

Comment: To “expose” a child is to abandon it to death, but many readers will not know this technical sense. If they do get it, the second reference in v. 21 sounds as though Moses’ mother tried to kill him.

NIV to throw out their newborn babies... he [Moses] was placed outside...

NLT abandon their newborn babies...had to abandon him [Moses].

1 Tim. 6:5

ESV and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

Comment: The ESV is open to misunderstanding, since godliness *is* a means to gain—spiritual gain. The word “gain” here clearly means financial profit, as NIV and HCSB make clear:

NIV godliness is a means to financial gain.

HCSB godliness is a way to material gain

Luke 1:48

ESV for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

Comment: A “humble estate” in English would normally be a modest home. It would be better to say “state.”

Exegetical Errors in the ESV

All translations must make difficult exegetical decisions, and some errors are inevitable. Here are some examples where an overly literal approach contributes to errors in the ESV.

Luke 7:47

ESV Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much.”

Comment: The woman’s sins were not forgiven *because* she loved much (which would be salvation by works). Jesus’ parable teaches the opposite: gratitude results from forgiveness. She loved much *because* her sins were forgiven. Both NIV and NET make this clear.

NIV Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown.

NET Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, are forgiven, thus she loved much.

Rom. 11:6

ESV But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

Comment: The ESV implies that salvation once came by works, but it no longer does. The Greek *ouketi* is not being used temporally (“no longer”), but logically, meaning “it is therefore not the case that...”¹⁰ NIV and HCSB get it right.

NIV And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works....

HCSB Now if by grace, then it is not by works....

1Tim. 1:3

ESV remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,

Comment: *Heterodidaskalō* here likely means doctrinal errors. The ESV’s “different doctrine” is too weak.

NIV ...not to teach false doctrines

NET ...not to spread false teachings

2Thess. 2:2

ESV we ask you, brothers... not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us...

Comment: “A spirit” will be misunderstood by most readers as an evil spirit or a demon. In this context is surely means a prophetic utterance. See the commentaries. “Shaken in mind” is also strange English.

NIV ...whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter...

REB ...by any prophetic utterance, any pronouncement, or any letter...

Matt. 13:21

ESV As for what was sown on rocky ground...he has no root in himself, but endures for a while...

Comment: In addition to the very strange “no root in himself,” the ESV misses the Greek idiom *proskairos estin*, which means “is temporary.” The point is not that he is able to *endure* for a while, but that he is short-lived.

NIV But since they have no root, they last only a short time.

NLT² But since they don’t have deep roots, they don’t last long.

Gal. 3:5

ESV Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—

Comment: The ESV and NIV makes it sound like God performs miracles by the works of the law. The NET clarifies this with “your.”

NIV ...by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

NET by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?

Matt. 24:41

ESV Two women will be grinding at the mill...

Comment: The phrase *en to mulo* likely means “with a handmill,” not “at the mill.” See the commentaries.

NIV ...grinding with a handmill

NET ...grinding with a mill

¹⁰ See Moo, *Romans*, 678, n. 42; cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988) 639.

Collocational Clashes in the ESV

Collocations are words that are used together in a language to express a particular meaning. For example, in English you “take a walk” but in Spanish you “give a walk” (*dar un paseo*). Spanish uses a different collocation to express the same meaning. Collocational clashes occur when translators render words literally without considering their collocational relationships in the target language. Here are some ESV examples.

Rom. 3:19

ESV Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped,

Comment: Mouths are not stopped; they are silenced or shut.

NIV ...so that every mouth may be silenced... (cf. NET, NRSV)

HCSB ... so that every mouth may be shut... (cf. NASB)

Heb. 11:33

ESV who through faith...stopped the mouths of lions,

Comment: Again, “stopping” a mouth in an odd collocation.

NIV ...shut the mouths of lions (cf. HCSB, NLT, NASU, NRSV, NET, REB, etc.)

Acts 20:9

ESV ...he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead.

Comment: “Taken up dead” is an odd collocation.

NIV ...and was picked up dead.

NET ...and was picked up dead.

1 Timothy 4:6

ESV If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus...

Comment: The natural collocation is to “point out to” (cf. NIV, NASB, NET, HCSB).

NIV If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters...

NET By pointing out such things to the brothers and sisters...

Phil. 2:29

ESV So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men,

Comment: “All joy” makes little sense. Greek *pas* (“all”) can be used in an emphatic sense meaning “with great joy” or simply “joyfully.”

NIV So when, welcome him in the Lord with great joy,

NET So welcome him in the Lord with great joy,

1Tim. 3:6

ESV He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

Comment “Fall into the condemnation” is strange English.

NIV ...and fall under the same judgment”

NAB ...incur the devil’s punishment”

Eph. 6:7

ESV ...rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man,

Comment The whole sentence is awkward, but especially the collocation “service with a good will.” We normally speak of “willing” “cheerful” or “enthusiastic” service.

NIV Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people,

NRSV Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women,

1Cor. 15:58

ESV ...be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord...

Comment “Abounding in the work” is an odd collocation. I can’t imagine someone today saying, “He abounds in the Lord’s work.”

NIV ...Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord...

NET Always be outstanding in the work of the Lord...

1Cor. 13:2

ESV ...and if I have all faith so that I can remove mountains, but do not have love...

Comment: “All faith” doesn’t make sense in English. The Greek collocation *pas tēn pistin* means either “sufficient faith” or “the kind of faith.”

NIV and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love...

NLT² and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn’t love others,

1Cor. 6:1

ESV When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?

Comment: In English we don’t “go to law,” we “go to court” or seek a judgment in a case.

NIV ...do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment...?

NET ...does he dare go to court before the unrighteous...?

Acts 6:7

ESV And the word of God continued to increase...

Comment: A message doesn’t “increase” (except in volume) it “spreads,” as almost all versions have it.

NIV So the word of God spread (cf. NASB, NKJV, NRSV, REB, NLT, NET, etc.)

Luke 12:51

ESV Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.

Comment: We don’t normally say, “give peace,” but rather “bring” or “establish” it.

NIV to bring peace on earth (cf. NRSV, NET, NLT, etc.)

Luke 24:46

ESV Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise...

Comment: It is not that Christ “should” suffer, but that he “will” or “would” suffer.

NIV ...The Messiah will suffer and rise... (NKJV, NRSV, etc.)

NET that the Christ would suffer and would rise... (cf. NASB)

Rom. 15:13

ESV May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,

Comment: The phrase “in believing” doesn’t quite go with “all joy and peace.”

NIV May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,

NET Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in him,

Rom. 14:11

ESV “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”

Comment: “Confess to God” is odd here. Confess what? The Greek verb *exomologeō* here means either “acknowledge” or “praise.” The ESV misses the idiom.

NIV “...every tongue will acknowledge God.”

NET “...every tongue will give praise to God.”

NASU “...every tongue shall give praise to God.”

Rom. 14:7

ESV For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

Comment: This is not about living “to the Lord” (whatever that means; v. 8) but living “for the Lord” —a dative of advantage. The ESV misses the collocation.

NIV For none of us lives for ourselves alone and none of us dies for ourselves alone.

NET For none of us lives for himself and none dies for himself.

NASU For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

Rom. 12:11

ESV Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Comment: Slothful in zeal?

NIV Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor,

NET Do not lag in zeal, be enthusiastic in spirit,

1Tim. 1:5

ESV The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Comment: Combining “aim” and “charge” makes Paul sound more military than exhortational.

NIV The goal of this command is love,

NASU But the goal of our instruction is love

1 Timothy 5:19

ESV Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Comment: “Admit a charge” is an unusual English collocation.

NIV Do not entertain an accusation against an elder

NET Do not accept an accusation against an elder...

Matt. 7:16

ESV Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

Comment You don’t “gather” grapes or figs; you pick them.

NIV Do people pick grapes from thornbushes (cf. NLT, REB, etc.)

Luke 24:17

ESV And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?”

Comment: You would normally “have a conversation,” not “hold a conversation”

NIV He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

Luke 22:40

ESV “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.”

Comment We would normally say either “pray that you won’t give in to temptation” or “pray that you won’t be tempted.”

NIV “...fall into temptation” (cf. NET)

NLT² “...give in to temptation.”

Luke 21:7

ESV “Teacher, when will these things be...?”

Comment: Events don’t usually “be.” They happen or occur.

NIV “when will these things happen?”

NASB “when therefore will these things happen?” (cf. NET, NLT)

Luke 22:49

ESV And when those who were around him saw what would follow, they said, “Lord, shall we strike with the sword?”

Comment We normally see “what was coming” or “what was about to happen.” Most other literal versions get this one right (cf. NASB, NKJV, NRSV, etc.).

NIV what was going to happen

Matt. 1:22

ESV All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

Comment: More natural to say the Lord spoke “through” the prophet. Most literal versions get this right (cf. NASB, NKJV, NRSV, etc.).

NIV ... through the prophet

Acts 21:5

ESV When our days there were ended, we departed...

Comment: Unnatural English.

NIV When it was time to leave; **NET** When our time was over,

ESV Archaisms

Archaisms are also often literal fallacies, but this category also applies to words or phrases that were likely retained because they sounded “biblical,” which normally means “Elizabethan”—entering the language through the King James Version. We must ask whether these expressions would be considered normal English today.

Matt. 1:18

ESV When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together...

Comment: Both “betrothed” and “came together” are archaic. Nobody in English today say would say “though betrothed, my wife and I had not yet come together when I started college.”

NIV His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together....

NLT His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place...

Matt. 1:18

ESV ...she was found to be with child,

Comment: The ESV is not literal here (the Greek idiom is “having in belly”), so this can only be classified as an archaism. Of course I would never say today my wife is “with child” unless I were trying to sound archaic and “biblical.”

NIV ...she was found to be pregnant,

REB ...it was discovered... that she was pregnant

Matt. 1:25

ESV Joseph... knew her not until she had given birth to a son.

Comment: The euphemism “knew her not” is both awkward and archaic. Reverse this to normal English word order —“he did not know her”—and I think everyone would agree this is inadequate. Phrases like “marital relations” or “sexual relations” are much clearer and still euphemistic.

NIV But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son.

NET did not have marital relations with her until she gave birth to a son,

NLT² Joseph... did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born.

Mark 12:20

ESV “there were seven brothers...the first one took a wife,”

Comment: No one in contemporary English says “I took a wife.” This archaism is unlikely to be used today even in the context of an arranged marriage.

NIV “... The first one married,”

NRSV "...the first one married,"

1 Cor. 10:26 (Ps. 24:1)

ESV "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof."

Comment: "The fullness thereof" is not contemporary English. The Greek idiom *to plērōma autēs* means "everything in it" or "the things it produces." No one speaking English would say, "I own that farm and the fullness thereof."

NIV "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."

HCSB "the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it."

Acts 15:25

ESV it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men...

Comment: "Came to one accord" is not contemporary English. I would never say "the school board came to one accord," but rather "they reached a unanimous decision" or "they all agreed."

NIV So we all agreed to choose some men...

NET we have unanimously decided to choose men...

2 Tim. 2:19

ESV Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.

Comment: "Depart from iniquity" is archaic. "Iniquity" is *adikias*, meaning unrighteousness, wickedness or injustice. We would never say of someone who turned away from a sinful life that "he departed from iniquity."

NIV ...turn away from wickedness.

NLT² ...turn away from evil.

Deut. 19:3

ESV set apart three cities...so that any manslayer can flee to them.

Comment: "Manslayer" is surely archaic.

NIV ...so that a person who kills someone may flee for refuge to one of these cities.

REB ..so that anyone who commits manslaughter can flee to these cities.

Acts 15:18

ESV says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.

Comment: Whether in poetry or not, "known from of old" is not English. Known "from ages past" or "from long ago" would also be poetic, but not so archaic.

NIV ...known from long ago.

NET ...known from long ago.

Luke 1:15

ESV And he must not drink wine or strong drink

Comment: *Sicera* refers to fermented beverages other than wine, usually beer (= grain alcohol). Nobody today uses the phrase "strong drink," which for modern people suggests distilled beverages, which were unknown in the ancient world.

NIV ...wine or other fermented drink, (cf. NLT)

HCSB ...wine or beer,

Acts 2:3

ESV And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them...

NIV They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire...

NET And tongues spreading out like a fire appeared to them...

Acts 2:4

ESV And they...began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

NIV ...as the Spirit enabled them.
NRSV ...as the Spirit gave them ability.

Acts 7:3

ESV Go out from your land and from your kindred
NIV Leave your country and your people,
NET Go out from your country and from your relatives,

Matt. 26:7

ESV she poured it [the ointment] on his head as he reclined at table.
NIV ...as he was reclining at the table.
NRSV ...as he sat at the table.

Matt. 21:19

ESV And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it...
NIV Seeing a fig tree by the road...
NASU Seeing a lone fig tree by the road... (cf. NRSV, NKJV, HCSB, NET etc.)

Matt. 8:26

ESV “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?”
Comment: An archaism. There is no “O” in the Greek, which is one word, *oligopistoi*.
NIV ...You of little faith,
NASB ...you of little faith,

Luke 1:25

ESV “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”
Comment: Three awkward English phrases.
NIV The Lord has done this for me... In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people

Luke 24:29

ESV “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.”
NIV “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.”
HCSB “Stay with us, because it’s almost evening, and now the day is almost over.”

Luke 23:41

ESV “And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds,”
NIV “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.”

Luke 23:12

ESV And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.
NIV before this they had been enemies.

Acts 8:2

ESV Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.
Comment: In English we would never say “make great lamentations.” The collocation means to “mourn deeply” or to “lament loudly.”
NIV Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.
HCSB But devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him.

Rev. 21:16

ESV The city lies foursquare,

NIV The city was laid out like a square,

NASB The city is laid out as a square,

Genesis 1:29 (1061 times in the ESV)

ESV And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed

Comment: The English word “behold” occurs 1061 times in the ESV, usually rendering the Hebrew *hinneh* or the Greek *idou*. This is a difficult one for translators, since virtually no one speaking English uses the word this way. I can’t imagine exclaiming to my wife, “Behold, the beautiful sunset!” We would only use it in idiomatic expressions like “She’s a sight to behold!” So how should the term be translated? Sometimes “Look!” “See!” or “Listen!” works well, but in most cases the sense is much softer than this, and introducing any word creates unnatural English. Here we have tension between reproducing normal English and providing a window onto the Hebrew or Greek. My counsel would be for literal versions to retain “behold” or “look” and for standard English versions to either drop it or use “look” or “see” when appropriate.

NIV Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant

REB God also said, “Throughout the earth I give you all plants that bear seed

NRSV God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed

NLT² Then God said, “Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant

Inconsistent Gender-Language in the ESV

The ESV arose in part as a response against the gender-inclusive language of other versions like the TNIV and the NLT. At the same time, the ESV revisers obviously recognized the major changes in gender-language taking place in English, since they removed the words “man” or “men” 671 times from the RSV!¹¹

While removing these masculine words in many cases, in many others where the context was equally inclusive, the terms were retained. Such inconsistency can create confusion for the reader, who cannot tell when the Hebrew or Greek behind the ESV is an inclusive term and when it is not. Consider the following examples.

Men or People?

All scholars agree that the primary sense of the Greek *anthrōpos* is “person” or “human being,” not “man” (= male). The ESV recognizes this and often translates the term as “one” instead of “man.” Rom. 3:28 ESV reads, “For we hold that one (*anthrōpos*) is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” While someone might wonder how an “essentially literal” translation could justify translating a Greek word meaning “person” as “one,” at least the ESV has recognized that the Greek term is inclusive.

In many cases, the ESV uses inclusive language for *anthrōpos*. Rom. 10:5 ESV reads, “For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person (*anthrōpos*) who does the commandments shall live by them.” Similarly, Acts 10:28 ESV reads “...God has shown me that I should not call any person (*anthrōpos*) common or unclean.”¹²

¹¹ Confirmed by a comparative search on Accordance Bible software.

¹² Consider this surprising example, where the ESV uses “person” and the NIV “man.” 1 Cor. 7:26 NIV: “Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man (*anthrōpos*) to remain as he is.” 1 Cor. 7:26 ESV “I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person (*anthrōpos*) to remain as he is. Consider also Luke 6:45, where the ESV has, “The good person...the evil person...,” while the NIV has, “A good man... an evil man....”

The ESV is not always consistent, however, and in many generic contexts the noun is translated “man” or “men.” 1 Thess. 2:4 reads, “we speak, not to please man (*anthrōpoi*), but to please God who tests our hearts.” “Man” here is the plural *anthrōpoi*, which clearly means “people.” Curiously, the ESV has changed a Greek plural into an English singular—exactly the kind of number change that some members of the ESV committee have condemned other versions for doing!

The same thing happens in Matt. 19:26: “But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man (*anthrōpoi*—plural) this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Again, the ESV has changed a plural meaning “people” into a singular, and translated it “man.” Again in John 12:43 ESV: “for they loved the glory that comes from man (*anthrōpoi*—plural, meaning “people”) more than the glory that comes from God.”

While in some cases the plural *anthrōpoi* is translated “people,” in other cases it is translated “man” or “men” with apparently no difference in meaning. Consider these examples:

Rom. 5:18 ESV: “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men (*anthrōpoi*), so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men (*anthrōpoi*).”

Comment: *Anthrōpoi* clearly means “people”. We might expect that in a context about salvation, the translators would consider an inclusive term.

Matt. 4:19 ESV: “And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men (*anthrōpoi*).’”

Comment: The disciples were, of course, called to fish for people, not just men.

1 Cor. 2:5 ESV: “that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men (*anthrōpoi*) but in the power of God.”

Comment: This is surely human wisdom, not the wisdom of males.

There are many similar examples:

Eph. 4:8 ESV: “Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men (*anthrōpoi*).’”

Matt. 10:32-33 ESV: “So every one who acknowledges me before men (*anthrōpoi*), I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men (*anthrōpoi*), I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

Rom. 1:18 ESV: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men (*anthrōpoi*) who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”

Sometimes the ESV is inconsistent in a single context. Matthew 12:11-12 reads “Which one (*anthrōpos*) of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man (*anthrōpos*) than a sheep!” The same Greek word is translated inclusively (“one”) in the first instance and as “man” in the second. In both, *anthrōpos* clearly refers to a human being.

Similar inconsistency appears in John 1:4 ESV: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men (*anthrōpoi*).” A few sentences later we read “The true light, which enlightens everyone (*pas anthrōpos*), was coming into the world” (John 1:9 ESV) Again, the same term is translated as “men” in one instance and “everyone” in the next.

Consider also 2Tim. 2:2: “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men (*anthrōpoi*) who will be able to teach others also.” Although *anthrōpoi* normally means “people,” it is here translated “men,” presumably because of the reference to teaching. Yet just a chapter later the same term is translated “people,” here in a context of sinful behavior: “For people (*anthrōpoi*) will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy...” (2Tim. 3:2).

Sons or Children?

Gender inconsistency also appears with reference to generational terms. The same Greek phrase, *huiioi tou Israēl* is sometimes translated “sons of Israel” (Matt. 27:9; Rom. 9:27; Rev. 2:14; 7:4; 21:12) and other times “children of Israel” (Luke 1:16; Acts 7:23; 9:15), without any clear difference in meaning. Romans 9:27 reads, “And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,’ while Luke 1:16 reads, “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.”

Particularly striking is Acts 7:23, where the masculine term “brothers” is placed beside the inclusive term children: “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel.” Shouldn’t this be “brothers and sisters”?

Matt. 23:15 ESV: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.” The Colorado Springs Guidelines (produced in 1997 in reaction against gender-inclusive Bible translation¹³) insist that *huiios* must be translated as “son” rather than “child.” Strikingly, the only time the ESV translates the singular *huiios* as “child” is in the phrase “child of hell.” Hell is gender-inclusive but heaven is not?

“Brothers” or “Brothers and Sisters”?

One of the most interesting gender issues related to the ESV concerns its translation of the Greek plural *adelphoi*, a term that can mean “siblings,” “brothers and sisters,” “brothers,” or “fellow believers” (BDAG). While the original draft of the Colorado Springs Guidelines asserted that *adelphoi* should always be translated “brothers,” this was quickly revised when the authors of the Guidelines were informed by Greek scholars that *adelphoi* was often used inclusively to refer to both men and women, i.e., siblings, or “brothers and sisters.”

This admission did not make it into the text of the ESV, but it did make it into the footnotes. While consistently translating *adelphoi* as “brothers” in the text, the ESV includes a footnote at its first occurrence in each NT book acknowledging that it actually means “brothers and sisters”:

*Or *brothers and sisters*. The plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) refers to siblings in a family. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, *adelphoi* may refer either to men or to both men and women who are siblings (brothers and sisters) in God’s family, the church.

Consider, for example, Rom. 12:1 ESV, where Paul is certainly referring to all the members of the church: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers,* by the mercies of God, at present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” One wonders why, if the ESV footnote acknowledges that *adelphoi* here means “brothers and sisters,” it was not translated as such. The most likely answer is that the translators were concerned about their constituents, who would have objected to this perceived condescension to a feminist agenda. All translation is to some extent political, and in this case perhaps it was deemed necessary to sacrifice accuracy for expediency.

Awkward and Unnatural Style in the ESV

¹³See Mark L. Strauss, “Linguistic and Hermeneutical Fallacies in the Guidelines Established at the ‘Conference on Gender-Related Language in Scripture,’” *JETS* 41/2 (June 1998) 239-262.

There are thousands of examples where the ESV is not necessarily wrong or exegetically inaccurate, but is awkward and unnatural English. Examples can be found on virtually every page. Here is a small sampling.

Mark 3:28

ESV “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man,

Comment: The phrase “children of man” is very odd, with a plural followed by a singular. Passive construction is also awkward

NIV Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins...

Luke 12:50

ESV I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!

Comment: The cognate accusative in Greek (lit. “to be baptized a baptism”) just doesn’t work in English. We would never say “they are going to baptize with baptisms on Sunday.” Even the NASB catches the idiom.

NIV But I have a baptism to undergo... (cf. NET, NASB, etc.)

Matt. 1:20

ESV “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife,”

Comment: “Fear to take” is an unnatural idiom. We would say “Don’t be afraid to take...”

NIV “...do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife,”

NASB “... do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife,” (cf. NET, REB, NJB, etc.)

Matt. 6:34

ESV Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

NIV Each day has enough trouble of its own.

NASB Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Mark 6:31

ESV For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

Comment: “Leisure to eat” sounds like the idiom of a British country club.

NIV they did not even have a chance to eat,

NET and there was no time to eat

Matt. 14:5

ESV “he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.”

Comment: Though a possible use of “hold,” this is awkward English. Idiomatic English would say they “considered him,” “regarded him” or “believed John was” (NLT). The ESV is trying to translate the Greek *echō* “literally” as “have” or “hold,” resulting in unnatural English. But the semantic range of *echō* is much larger than “have” or “hold.”

NIV ...because they considered John a prophet.

NASB ...because they regarded John as a prophet. (cf. NET, NLT)

Acts 14:11

ESV And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!”

Comment: Neither “lifted their voices” nor “the likeness of men” are natural English idioms. We would never say, the crowd in the stadium “lifted their voices.” We would say they “shouted” or “cried out.”

NIV ...they shouted... “The gods have come down to us in human form!”

NET ...they shouted... “The gods have come down to us in human form!”

Acts 11:30

ESV And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Comment: “By the hand of” is unnatural English and surely a dead metaphor in Greek. It means “by means of,” “through the agency of,” or (most naturally) “with.” I would never say, “I sent that exam home by the hand of his wife.” That is Biblical.

NIV ...sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

God’s Word ... and sent their contribution with Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

Matt. 18:3

ESV unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Comment: The ESV’s “turn and become” is a very odd expression. Turn where?

NIV unless you change and become like little children,

NLT unless you turn from your sins and become like little children,

HCSB unless you are converted and become like children

Matt. 14:10

ESV He sent and had John beheaded in the prison,

Comment: The ESV’s “sent and had...” is very odd. Sent what? The Greek reads (lit.) “sending, he executed John.” The participle *pempsas* simply indicates agency. Herod didn’t do it himself; he sent orders or sent soldiers to accomplish the task. The NIV captures the idiom accurately: “he...had John beheaded.”

NIV he...had John beheaded in the prison.

HCSB So he sent orders and had John beheaded in the prison.

Matt. 12:34

ESV You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

Comment: In English to “speak good” means to be eloquent or clear. The ESV sounds like it is saying those who are evil don’t talk very well. The phrase means to say good things (NRSV) or to speak what is good (NASU). The ESV’s “out of the abundance” is simply obscure.

NIV ...how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

NET How are you able to say anything good, since you are evil? For the mouth speaks from what fills the heart.

Matt. 9:4

ESV “Why do you think evil in your hearts?”

Comment: English normally requires an object in such sentences.

NIV ...“Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?”

HCSB ...“Why are you thinking evil things in your hearts?”

Matt. 1:21 (cf. Matt. 1:25; Luke 1:31)

ESV She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus

Comment: This is a unnatural English idiom. I would not say, “I called my son’s name Daniel.” I would say, “I called my son Daniel” or “I named my son Daniel.”

NIV he will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,

NET he will give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus

Titus 3:4-5

ESV ...he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness...

Comment: “Works done by us in righteousness” is nonsensical English. The Greek means “righteous works that we have done.”

NIV ...not because of righteous things we had done...

NET ...not by works of righteousness that we have done...

Phil. 4:6

ESV do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Comment: Because so many of us memorized this as children, the phrasing here may sound “poetic,” but it is in fact tortured English. In normal English we would never say “let your request be made known to God.”

NIV ...present your requests to God.

NET ...tell your requests to God.

Gal. 4:7

ESV So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Comment: “An heir through God” is a very strange English expression. The preposition *dia* indicates agency, so a normal English way to say this would be “...and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir” (NIV) or, as in the REB: “and if a son, an heir by God’s own act.”

Luke 17:4

ESV and if he sins against you seven times in the day

Comment: Odd English. Shouldn’t this be “in one day” or “in a day”?

NIV ...seven times in a day (cf. NET, HCSB, REB, etc.)

Word Order Problems

Sometimes literal versions retain Hebrew or Greek word order without due consideration for normal English style. This can create awkward English and also miscommunication. The ESV sometimes sounds like Yoda from the Star Wars trilogy.

Matt. 7:27

ESV And the rain fell, and the floods came...and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Comment: The ESV is tortured English here. The HCSB gets the word order right, but produces an unnatural construction, implying that the collapse was a great thing.

NIV ...and it fell with a great crash.”

HCSB ...it collapsed. And its collapse was great!

Phil. 3:20

ESV But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,

Comment: This is both a word order problem and a translation error. The ESV makes it sound like we are in heaven awaiting a Savior, rather than that we are awaiting a Savior from heaven.

NIV ...in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,

NET ...in heaven—and we also await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,

Matt. 24:32

ESV From the fig tree learn its lesson...

Comment: Placing the preposition phrase first and then adding a resumptive pronoun “its” creates very strange English. Though happy with it Yoda would be.

NIV Now learn this lesson from the fig tree...

NET Learn this parable from the fig tree...

1 Cor. 15:41

ESV There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

Comment: It is odd to say “There is one glory of the sun.” Better English would say “The sun has one kind of glory”

NIV The sun has one kind of splendor...

NLT The sun has one kind of glory...

Psalms 37:1 cf. 37:7, 8, 19

ESV Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!

Comment: Nearly everyone who has reviewed the ESV has noted the large number of archaic word orderings with English “not.” Interestingly, the ESV team did change many, but not all, of these archaisms to the normal English word order.

NIV Do not fret because of those who are evil.

NASB Do not fret because of evildoers,

Matt. 24:30

ESV Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man...

Comment: Word order is backwards in both ESV and NIV.

NIV Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven,

NET Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, (cf. NASB, NRSV, etc.)

Matt. 18:21

ESV “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” As many as seven times?”

Comment It sounds like Peter is asking how many times his brother is likely to sin against him!

NIV “Lord, how many times shall I forgive a brother or sister who sins against me?”

Matt. 7:13-14

ESV “For the gate is wide... and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow... and those who find it are few.

Comment: Awkward word order.

NIV ...and many enter through it... and only a few find it.

NASB and there are many who enter through it.... and there are few who find it.

Luke 6:45

ESV The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil...

Comment: Another odd word order.

NIV A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart...

Luke 13:23

ESV “Lord, will those who are saved be few?”

NIV “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”

NRSV Lord, will only a few be saved?

Luke 22:29

ESV and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom,

Comment: The word “kingdom” is hanging awkwardly at the end of the line.

NIV And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me,

HCSB I bestow on you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one on Me,

Luke 21:6

ESV “...the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Comment: The subject “not one stone...” should be first. Also, the relative clause at the end is awkward.

NIV “...the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”

Luke 22:47

ESV While he was still speaking, there came a crowd,

Comment: Should be “a crowd came,” not “there came a crowd.”

NIV While he was still speaking a crowd came up,

Luke 23:15

ESV “Look [why not ‘Behold’?], nothing deserving death has been done by him.”

Comment: Very awkward passive construction. Better: “he has done nothing to deserve death.”

NIV as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.

NRSV Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death

Luke 23:27

ESV And there followed him a great multitude of the people

NIV A large number of people followed him,

Luke 24:24

ESV Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.”

Comment: Unnatural reading, perhaps for emphasis. The NIV, NRSV and NET are more natural English with little change in emphasis.

NIV but they did not see Jesus.

NRSV But they did not see him. (cf. NET)

Luke 18:16

ESV “Let the children come to me...for to such belongs the kingdom of God.

NIV “...for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

NASB “...for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

Matt. 9:29

ESV Then he touched their eyes, saying, “According to your faith be it done to you.”

Comment: The NIV improves the ESV’s “be it done to you,” but the NET has the more natural word order.

NIV According to your faith let it be done to you

NET “Let it be done for you according to your faith.”

Luke 2:20

ESV And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Comment: Tacking this phrase onto the end makes it sound like they were told to praise God, instead of that these events occurred just as the angel said they would.

NIV glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke 1:53

ESV he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

Comment: The ESV is less parallel in the two lines and so less poetic, as well as more awkward.

NIV He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. (cf. NASU, NRSV)

1Cor. 15:31

ESV I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!

Comment: Awkward clause tacked on the end.

NIV I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord.

NET Every day I am in danger of death! This is as sure as my boasting in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Run-on Sentences and Tortured English

Greek loves long complex sentences with many subordinate clauses. English style favors shorter sentences. All English versions, including the ESV, break long Greek sentences into much shorter English ones (see, for example, Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Thess. 1:3-10). Yet at times the ESV retains long run-on sentences. Consider these examples:

Titus 2:11 ESV For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Eph. 6:18-20 ESV To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Comment This run-on sentence is awkward enough, but the phrase “that words may be given to me in opening my mouth” is truly tortured.

Col. 1:21-23 ESV And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Comment: Another awkward run-on sentence that completely loses the reader, with many non-standard English phrases. Reading this aloud in church would leave the speaker gasping for air.

Gal. 4:18-19

ESV It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!

Comment: Run-on sentence with confused logic. The REB captures much more naturally Paul’s sense: “To be the object of sincere attentions is always good, and not just when I am with you. You are my own children, and I am in labour with you all over again until you come to have the form of Christ.”

1 Cor. 15:1-2 ESV Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

Comment: ESV creates an awkward run-on sentence, with a hanging phrase at the end.

1 Thess. 4:1 ESV Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

Mistranslated Genitives

First-year Greek students are often taught to translate genitives with the English prepositional phrase “of + NOUN,” as in “the word of God.” They quickly learn, however, that this is a gross simplification of the multitude of genitival functions. Unfortunately, literal versions often default to the “of” construction without due consideration of the meaning of the genitive phrase in context. Here are a few examples from the ESV of genitives that are obscure, nonsensical, or misleading.

Heb. 1:3

ESV he [Christ] upholds the universe by the word of his power

Comment: Nonsensical (word that his power possesses?). This is an attributive genitive, meaning “his powerful word”

NIV ...his powerful word (cf. NIV, NET, HCSB, GNT, NRSV).

Luke 24:49

ESV And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you.

Comment: Jesus is not sending the promise, but what his Father promised—the Holy Spirit. This is a subjective genitive.

NIV I am going to send you what my Father has promised;

HCSB And look, I am sending you what My Father promised.

Mark 4:5

ESV and immediately it [the seed] sprang up, since it had no depth of soil.

Comment: Awkward, non-English phrase.

NIV ...because the soil was shallow.

HCSB ... since it didn't have deep soil.

Rom. 6:4

ESV we too might walk in newness of life.

Comment: This is an attributed genitive, meaning “a new life” (cf. NJB, GW, NLT, TEV, CEV).

NIV we too may live a new life

NET we too may live a new life

John 5:29

ESV those who have done good to the resurrection of life

Comment: ESV sounds like “life” is being resurrected, rather than life as the destination of the resurrection. This is a genitive of destination.¹⁴

NIV those who have done what is good will rise to live

NET the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life

Rom. 8:2

ESV For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus ...

Comment: “Spirit of life” sounds like the vibrancy of life, rather than the Holy Spirit who gives life (a genitive of product¹⁵).

NIV ...the law of the Spirit who gives life...

NET ...the law of the life-giving Spirit...

Rom. 8:21

ESV ... the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Comment: Nonsensical English. Glory is free? (The NET reflects an attributive genitive.¹⁶)

NIV ...the freedom and glory of the children of God.

NET ...the glorious freedom of God's children

2 Cor. 3:7

ESV Now if the ministry of death...came with such glory..

¹⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan) 101.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 106.

¹⁶ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 86-87.

Comment: The ESV suggests that the ministry is death, when in fact it is the OT system of law. This is a genitive of product.¹⁷

NIV the ministry that brought death,

NET the ministry that produced death—

Eph. 1:17

ESV the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,

Comment: Does God beget glory? This is an attributive genitive, meaning “glorious Father.”¹⁸

NIV the glorious Father (cf. HCSB, GW, NLT, TEV, CEV)

HCSB the glorious Father

1 Thess. 1:3

ESV We recall...your...steadfastness of hope

Comment: No English speaker would use this expression.

NIV endurance inspired by hope

NLT² the enduring hope you have

Heb. 2:9

ESV crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death.

Comment: ESV makes it sound like death suffers.

NIV ... because he suffered death (cf. NET, REB, NLT, etc.)

2Pet. 3:4

ESV They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming?”

Comment: The ESV makes it sound like these scoffers are asking where the promise is, rather than questioning Christ’s return. This is an objective genitive.¹⁹

NIV They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised?”

NET and saying, “Where is his promised return?” (cf. REB)

Heb. 10:7

ESV as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.”

Comment: “Scroll of the book” is redundant and nonsensical. Is it a scroll or a book? This is an idiomatic way of speaking of the scroll itself by referring to its pages or rolled sheets.

NIV it is written about me in the scroll (cf. REB).

James 1:10

ESV like a flower of the grass

Comment: Odd expression. The idiom probably means a wild flower.

NIV like a wild flower (cf. NET, REB, etc.)

Conclusion

As noted earlier, this survey is just the tip of the iceberg. It should be evident, however, that the ESV needs a major revision with reference to its English style. I would recommend that the ESV committee enlist English stylists to review the entire text carefully with an eye toward standard English idiom.

¹⁷ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 106.

¹⁸ Wallace, *Greek, Grammar*, 86-87.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 116-118.

There is an unfortunate tendency among biblical scholars—who live in the world of Hebrew and Greek—to think they are getting it “right” if they mimic the form of the original languages. The unfortunate result is a tendency to create “half-idioms” (half-English/half-Greek), transferring a few words of the original, but missing its meaning in standard English. This is what the ESV does when people speak “with a double heart” (Ps. 12:2), have “news in their mouths” (2Sam. 18:25), “go in and out among them” (Acts 1:21; 9:28), or “fill up the measure of their fathers” (Matt. 23:32). These are half-idioms—Biblish rather than English. As noted earlier, idioms work *as a whole* rather than through their individual parts. In translating the English idiom, “He’s really in a pickle,” it would be a mistake to preserve cucumbers in the translation. It is not the component parts but the statement as a whole that communicates its meaning.

Some critics have claimed that the only way to protect the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture is to translate literally. This, of course, is linguistic nonsense. The translation that *best* preserves the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture is one that clearly and accurately communicates the *meaning* of the text as the original author intended it to be heard. The Greek idioms that Paul or John or Luke used did not sound awkward, obscure or stilted to their original readers. They sounded like normal idiomatic Greek. Verbal and plenary inspiration is *most* respected when we allow the original meaning of the text to come through.

Asking the simple question, “Would anyone speaking English actually say this?” is a good test for standard English. This simple question could transform our Bible versions and bring them in line with the finest translation practices used around the world. We must remember that the ultimate goal of Bible translation is not to give our students a “crib” on their weekly Greek and Hebrew assignments, but to clearly and accurately communicate the meaning of God’s inspired and authoritative Word.