

## Form, Function, and the “Literal Meaning” Fallacy in Bible Translation<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction: The Rise of Meaning-Based Bible Translation

The 1980s and '90s may rightly be called the heyday of functional equivalence in Bible translation. During these decades the meaning-based translation theories associated especially with Eugene Nida, the United Bible Societies and Wycliffe Bible Translators (SIL), flourished both in the English speaking world and in the world of international Bible translation. Nida originally referred to his method as “dynamic equivalence,” later adopting the more appropriate “functional equivalent.”<sup>2</sup> The first English version to consciously adopt this method was *Today’s English Version* (TEV; also known as the *Good News Bible* [GNB]). The New Testament, translated by Robert Bratcher under the auspices of the American Bible Society, was published in 1966 as *Good News for Modern Man*. The whole Bible followed in 1976. Even before the TEV, various attempts had been made to produce translations which reflected contemporary English idiom. A number of such versions appeared in the early twentieth century, including *The New Testament in Modern Speech* (1903), produced by Richard Weymouth, *The Twentieth Century New Testament* (1904), a committee production, *The New Testament: A New Translation* (1913, 1926) by James Moffatt, and *The New Testament: An American Translation* (1923) by Edgar J. Goodspeed. All of these sought to translate the Bible into clear and contemporary English. Goodspeed, in a statement with remarkable affinity to later dynamic equivalent theory, wrote “I wanted my translation to make on the reader something of the impression the New Testament must have made on its earliest readers.”<sup>3</sup> This vivid relevance was the particular concern of works like J. B. Phillips’ *New Testament in Modern English* (1958) and Kenneth Taylor’s enormously popular *Living Bible, Paraphrased* (1967, 1971). For many readers, Taylor’s dynamic and idiomatic renderings brought to life what had previously been a closed and incomprehensible book.

Since all Bible translation utilizes both formal and functional equivalence, it is impossible to simply categorize versions as either one or the other. All translations exist on a continuum between form and function. The *New International Version* (NIV; 1973, 1978), the most popular version in the English speaking world, claims to be a middle-of-the-road or mediating version between these two translation theories. Indeed, most contemporary English versions profess to seek the perfect balance between accuracy and

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<sup>2</sup> See Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another. Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), 7–8.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed, *New Chapters in New Testament Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 113.

readability. Terms like “complete equivalence” (NKJV), “optimal equivalence” (HCSB), “literal-idiomatic” (ISV), and “closest natural equivalent” (*God’s Word*) are frequently coined by Bible translators to express this balance.<sup>4</sup> But it is beyond dispute that the last quarter century has seen the proliferation of more idiomatic Bible versions. In addition to those cited above, recent English versions which have been heavily influenced, either directly or indirectly, by functional equivalence include the *New English Bible* (NEB; 1961; 1970), the *Jerusalem Bible* (JB; 1966), the *New American Bible* (NAB; 1970; rev. NT, 1986); the *New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB; 1986), the *New Century Version* (1987, 1991), the *Revised English Bible* (1989), *The Message* (1994), *God’s Word* (1995), the *Contemporary English Version* (1991, 1995), the *New Living Translation* (1996), and *Today’s New International Version* (NT: 2002).

This does not mean that formal equivalent versions have lost their influence in the English speaking world. The *King James Version*, like its predecessors, took a predominantly formal equivalence approach, and its revisions have continued this tradition:<sup>5</sup> the *Revised Version* (RV; 1881-85), the *American Standard Version* (ASV; 1901), the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV; 1952), the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB; 1971; updated ed. 1995), the *New King James Version* (NKJV; 1982), the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV; 1990) and now the *English Standard Version* (ESV; 2001). In addition, recent new versions (not revisions) like the *International Standard Version* (ISV; NT: 1998) and the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (HCSB; NT: 2000) generally follow a formal equivalent approach. There are at least six widely available English Bibles (KJV, RSV, NKJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV) and two New Testaments (ISV, HCSB) which are generally formal equivalent. The KJV is still the second largest selling English version (behind the NIV), the NKJV is fourth, and the NASB is sixth.<sup>6</sup> In light of this, it seems a bit odd that in a recent *Christianity Today* article, Raymond Van Leeuwen would argue that “We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation,” “one that works from a different theory than FE [functional equivalence].”<sup>7</sup> The title of the article suggests that there is a dearth of formal equivalent versions and a commensurate overload of functional equivalent versions. Yet while functional equivalence is dominant in the world of international Bible translation, this is clearly not the case in the English speaking world, where many pastors and churchgoers (and some scholars) still favor formal equivalence.

Indeed, the last few years have seen a resurgence in formal equivalence as a translation theory, a trend D. A. Carson calls “the rise of linguistic conservatism.”<sup>8</sup> This

<sup>4</sup> See the introductions or prefaces to each of these versions for these terms. The description “closest natural equivalent” is used by de Waard and Nida in *From One Language to Another*, 41.

<sup>5</sup> See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation. Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> These figures are from the Christian Booksellers Association, available at <http://www.cbaonline.org>. The order of the first ten as of December 2003 is: NIV, KJV, NLT, NKJV, The Message, NASB, NIV, Interlinear and Parallel Bibles, Amplified Bible, NCV. The NLT recently passed the NKJV.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Van Leeuwen, “We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation,” *CT* vol. 45 no. 13 (Oct. 22, 2001), 28-35, quote from p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation – and Other Limits Too,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation. Communicating God’s Word to the World. Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood*, eds. Glen G. Scorgie Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 65-113.

may be seen, on the one hand, in recent versions like the ESV and HCSB which tend more toward formal equivalence. It may also be seen in a number of articles and books criticizing functional equivalence as a translation theory. Some of these accept functional equivalence as a legitimate method which plays an important role in the church, but warn of its weaknesses and criticize its dominance in the field.<sup>9</sup> Others consider functional equivalence to be fundamentally flawed as a translation theory, replacing God’s inspired *words* with loose and inaccurate paraphrase.<sup>10</sup>

My plan will be to establish the basic goal of translation, and then evaluate the manner in which formal and functional equivalent versions pursue this goal. I hope to bring greater clarity to this sometimes muddled debate.

### **The Goal of Translation: *The Transfer of Meaning***

Before we can establish the legitimacy of a translation theory, we must identify the goal of translation. A simple definition would be the following: *The goal of translation is to transfer the meaning of a text from one language (the source or donor language) to another language (the receptor or target language).* All parties agree that determining the meaning of the original text in the source language is essential to the translation process. All also agree that the modern day reader must be able to comprehend the meaning in the receptor language in order for the translation to be successful. While this is straightforward enough, the debate concerns *how best to transfer the meaning from the source language to the receptor language.* Advocates of formal equivalence, also known as literal, word-for-word, direct, or transparent translation,<sup>11</sup> claim that the formal

<sup>9</sup> See especially Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “On Bible Translation and Hermeneutics,” in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew *et al.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 284-311, and a more popular version, “We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation,” (See note 6 above). Van Leeuwen argues “that the dominance of ‘functional equivalence’ in Bible translation urgently needs supplementation by translations that are more direct and transparent to the original languages.” He objects to “the almost universal hegemony” of functionally equivalent versions, asserting that “*one* type of translation has come to dominate, and that dominant type of translation is less apt for Scripture in literate societies than in commonly supposed, particularly with respect to study by educated persons” Van Leeuwen calls for a translation that is more consistently *transparent* (a term he prefers to “literal”), “so that the original shines through it.” (“On Bible Translation,” 284-285, 287). See also Anthony Howard Nichols, “Translating the Bible: A Critical Analysis of E. A. Nida’s Theory of Dynamic Equivalence and Its Impact Upon Recent Bible Translations,” dissertation, University of Sheffield, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> See most recently, Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English. Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002). Ryken, professor of English at Wheaton College, identifies his work as a “wholehearted defense of essentially literal translation in the King James tradition” (p. 18). He decries dynamic equivalent translations for destroying the literary quality of the text, over-simplifying its meaning, removing important theological terminology, modernizing ancient contexts, and removing the majesty, mystery and ambiguity of the original. The book’s strength is its call for greater attention to the literary qualities of the Bible. Its weaknesses are a lack of linguistic sophistication with reference to Greek grammar and translation theory, and misrepresentation of the complexities of transferring meaning from one socio-linguistic context to another. He considers Eugene Nida’s influence on English Bible translation to be “on balance, negative, depriving current Bible readers of the Bible they need” (i.e., a literal one) (p. 14). Yet throughout the book, Ryken never seriously engages with Nida’s theories and does not seem to comprehend fundamental linguistic issues at stake in the debate. His arguments are often *ad hominem* and polemical.

<sup>11</sup> The two terms which are now coming into use, “direct” and “transparent,” are used somewhat differently by different practitioners. Some understand these to mean essentially the same as formal equivalence. Others who reject much formal equivalent methodology use them of translation which gives greater access

structure of the source language should be retained inasmuch as possible. Advocates of functional equivalence, also known as dynamic equivalence, meaning-based translation or idiomatic translation, stress the need to produce an equivalent meaning in the receptor language, regardless of the form.<sup>12</sup> In general, formal equivalence gives greater prominence to the source language, particularly its formal structure; functional equivalence gives equal prominence to source and receptor languages, stressing that both the meaning of the original and the perception of the readers are essential components of translation.<sup>13</sup> Formal equivalence places greater stress on individual words (hence, “word-for-word”); functional equivalence on the semantic function of phrases and clauses.

Translation is an inexact science and art and some meaning will be lost with every translation decision – whether formal or functional. There are significant challenges and potential pitfalls related to any translation approach. Advocates of functional equivalence themselves point this out, and the theoretical and practical literature is full of cautions, clarifications and caveats.<sup>14</sup> My thesis is that while there are important cautions related to functional equivalence, there are fundamental flaws with formal equivalence *as a philosophy of translation*. This is because *meaning* not *form* is the goal of Bible translation. Lexical and syntactical *semantics* must always take precedence over lexical and syntactical *forms*.

The goal of a literal or formal equivalent translation is to reproduce the form of the Greek and Hebrew as much as possible. In its more nuanced form this is often stated, “As literal as possible, as free as necessary.” In other words, the translator stays with one-to-one correspondence until it is necessary to alter this for the sake of meaning. But note that even this statement correctly gives veto power to meaning over form. Formal correspondence should be utilized if it produces equivalence of meaning. The ultimate goal is not *formal equivalence*, but *semantic equivalence*. The assumption of many practitioners seems to be that these two are the same, and that if you attain formal equivalence you have reached semantic equivalence. But as we will see, this is far from the case, since the formal structures of Hebrew and Greek are very different than the formal structures of English (or any other language). Even versions which *claim* to be “essentially literal” are far from formally equivalent. They constantly fall back on idiomatic renderings *whenever formal equivalence does not work*. In other words *function* or *meaning* is given precedence over *form*. This is because translators intuitively recognize that in almost every sentence, Greek and Hebrew idioms do not “work” the way English works. Thus, while translators of literal versions may be proceeding with a

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to semantic features of the source language. Because of this confusion of definition, I will not adopt them in this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Dynamic equivalence, a designation coined by Eugene Nida, was criticized as a theory for stressing the need to attain an “equivalent response” in the receptor audience. The term “functional equivalence” was coined in part to stress the need for equivalent *meaning* rather than equivalent *response*. We will deal with this difference in the discussion below.

<sup>13</sup> In practice, functional equivalence is often accused of giving too much prominence to the receptor language, but there are many cautions in the literature against this. We will discuss these later.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to the works of linguists and translators like Nida, see the important cautions of D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence in Bible Translation,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 9 (1985): 200-213, now revised and expanded in “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation – and Other Limits Too” (see note 7).

*method* of formal equivalence (word for word replacement), their decisions are governed by a *philosophy* of functional equivalence (change the form whenever necessary to retain the meaning).

The problem comes when translation decisions are affected by the perceived need to retain form. The result is often barely-comprehensible (or incomprehensible) English rather than a natural rendering which communicates to contemporary readers with the same clarity that the Greek or Hebrew communicated to the original readers.

Awkward and obscure English translations often result from seeking to translate idioms word-for-word, without carefully considering the meaning. Consider **Matthew 5:2**:

**NKJV:** Then **He opened His mouth and taught them**, saying:  
**RSV/ESV:** And **he opened his mouth and taught them**, saying:  
**NASB:** And **opening His mouth He began to teach them**, saying,  
**NIV/TNIV:** and **he began to teach them**, saying:  
**TEV:** and **he began to teach them**  
**NLT:** **This is what he taught them:**

The Greek idiom uses two phrases *anoigō to stoma* (“open the mouth”) + *didaskō*, (“teach”) to express a single action. Opening the mouth and teaching are not two consecutive actions, but one act of speaking (cf. Acts 8:35; 10:34; Rev. 13:6). In English we would never say, “The professor opened his mouth and taught the class.” This is a Greek idiom, not an English one.

Or consider **Acts 11:22**:

**NKJV:** Then news of these things **came to the ears of the church** in Jerusalem,  
**ESV:** The report of this **came to the ears of the church** in Jerusalem  
**NASB:** And the news about them **reached the ears of the church** at Jerusalem  
**NIV:** News of this **reached the ears of the church** at Jerusalem,  
**TEV:** The news about this **reached the church** in Jerusalem,  
**NLT:** When **the church at Jerusalem heard** what had happened,

None of these versions is actually word-for-word. The Greek, translated word-for-word (and adjusting word order), reads something like “but the word was heard into the ears of the church being in Jerusalem.” All of the versions significantly modify the Greek forms. Yet for the more formal equivalent versions there is a perceived need – even in the NIV – to retain the Greek idiom “into the ears of...” (*eis ta ōta tēs...*). But this is not English. I would never say “this came to my ears,” but rather “I heard this,” or “the news reached me.” The attempt to be “literal” has produced what scholars wryly call “Greek-lish,” an artificial translation-ese which mimics the syntactical forms of Greek. What sounded clear and natural to a Greek speaker now sounds awkward and unnatural.

The slogan “As literal as possible, as free as necessary” should be changed to a philosophy of translation which places the priority on meaning: “Translate the meaning; follow the form *when it promotes this goal.*”

I should add that I am not arguing against the production or use of formal equivalent Bible versions. I use them and encourage my students to use them. These versions have an important role in Bible study, particularly for those with only a rudimentary knowledge of the original languages. They are helpful *tools* for (1) identifying the formal

structure of the original text, (2) examining Hebrew or Greek idioms and formal patterns of language, (3) tracing recurrent words, (4) identifying ambiguities in the text, and (5) tracing formal verbal allusions (which might be obscured by idiomatic renderings).<sup>15</sup> In short, they provide a window on the original text for those with limited skills in studying it directly.

An examination of the translation process will help to illuminate why formal equivalence fails as a theory or philosophy of translation.

### Translation as Interpretation

Words are arbitrary and conventional symbols used to signify meaning. A word does not get its meaning from its sound or form, but from the conventional meaning attributed to it by a particular socio-linguistic group.<sup>16</sup> The English word "gift" commonly means "something bestowed voluntarily and without compensation." But the same word in German (*das Gift*) means "poison" (a very different kind of "gift"!). There is nothing inherent in the *form* of the word which determines its meaning. Words are conventional symbols which point to conceptual meaning.

The words or symbols of one language differ from the words or symbols of another. This is why translation is necessary. Not only are the words different, but the manner in which these words interact and relate to one another – their syntactical relationships – is also different. Because there is no one-to-one correspondence between words (lexemes) or their relationships (syntax), translation always involves a two-step process. The translator must first interpret the meaning of the symbols, and the relationship between those symbols, in the source language and then determine the best way to reproduce that meaning in the receptor language. The goal of translation is not the reproduction of *words*, but the transfer of *meaning*.

In a recent book, Leland Ryken disputes this basic translation model. In a chapter entitled "Seven Fallacies About Translation," he rejects as fallacious that "We should translate meaning rather than words," and that "All translation is interpretation."<sup>17</sup> He claims that by focusing on meaning, dynamic equivalent versions are wrongly "translating what they *interpret* the meaning of the original to be *instead of* first of all preserving the language of the original."<sup>18</sup>

But how can you "preserve the language of the original" when the source language is different than the receptor language? Ryken seems to assume the literalist fallacy that the words and syntax of one language have exact counterparts in another, so that meaning transfer occurs automatically. He tries to avoid this obvious fallacy by distinguishing between "linguistic interpretation" and "thematic interpretation."<sup>19</sup> As we shall see, this is a legitimate distinction when "linguistic interpretation" is defined correctly. But what Ryken means by "linguistic interpretation" is limited to "decisions regarding what English words best express Hebrew or Greek words."<sup>20</sup> This is far too narrow a

<sup>15</sup> These points are taken from my book, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation & Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 83.

<sup>16</sup> The exception is onomatopoeia, where a word (like "whoosh!") is intended to sound like its meaning.

<sup>17</sup> Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 79-91.

<sup>18</sup> Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 79, and *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 85-87.

<sup>20</sup> Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 85.

definition since languages differ not only in word meanings, but also in syntax, idioms, connotations, collocations, and a host of other ways. The translator practicing only Ryken's "linguistic interpretation" would have to render the Greek phrase *pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois* in Matthew 6:9 as "Father our the in the heavens," instead of "Our Father in heaven...." (ESV; TNIV) because the syntax of Greek and English function differently. The *message as a whole* must first be understood in the source language before the meaning can be transferred into the receptor language. All translation involves interpretation.

Although utilizing a more nuanced linguistic approach, Raymond Van Leeuwen expresses concerns similar to Ryken's. He claims that functional equivalent versions often practice interpretation which should be left to the reader. He writes "It is hard to know what the Bible *means* when we are uncertain about what it *says*."<sup>21</sup> The claim is that formal equivalence tells us "directly" what the Bible says, while functional equivalence inappropriately interprets the meaning of text. This interpretation, in turn, may be wrong, or at best, may limit the reader to only one option. Such interpretation, he argues, should be left to commentaries.

There is certainly a case to be made for retaining intentional ambiguity when it is present in the original text. Furthermore, translations must be careful not to exclude viable interpretations. We will deal with these issues later. Yet the statement "what the Bible *says*" is problematic from the start. The Bible is written in Hebrew and Greek, so every English translation changes *every word* of what the Bible *says*. Direct translation without interpretation is impossible since every word, phrase and clause in Greek or Hebrew must first be understood before it can be translated accurately. Since it is *impossible* to have a translation which "says what the Bible says," we need versions which *mean* what the Hebrew and Greek *mean*.<sup>22</sup>

### Translation as Communication

Since words are symbols representing ideas or concepts, we must go a step further and define the translation process more comprehensively. By definition, the transfer of meaning is an act of communication. For a translation to be successful, meaning must be transferred from *one person to another*. Meaning ultimately resides not in words or sentences, but in persons. Evangelical hermeneutics has historically associated the meaning of a text with the author's intention. The meaning of Paul's letter to the Galatians is discerned by exegeting the text to determine what Paul meant. Those conversant with contemporary hermeneutical discussion will recognize that this is an oversimplification, and that meaning must be seen as a dynamic interplay between

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<sup>21</sup> Van Leeuwen, "We Really Do Need," 30. Again: "The problem with FE [functional equivalence] (i.e., most modern translations) is that they prevent the reader from inferring biblical *meaning* because they change what the Bible *said*."

<sup>22</sup> Van Leeuwen is well aware of this. At one point he writes that "translation is a difficult and, in some ways, impossible task. Translations always compromise and interpret." He adds that, "A translator's first and most important job is to bridge the language gap. She seeks the best way of saying in English *what was said* first in Hebrew or Greek. But even this is not simple. No English word fully matches a Greek or Hebrew word." Yet a few paragraphs later he seems to contradict himself when he writes, "When our translations do not say what the Hebrew or Greek say, it is hard to know what the Bible means." Van Leeuwen, "We Really Do Need," 33.

author, text and reader.<sup>23</sup> While such nuancing is necessary, evangelicals steadfastly assert (a) that *there is a meaning in the text*, and (b) that this meaning has as its locus *the intentional speech-act of the historical author*. For translation to be successful, the intention – not just the words – of the author must be successfully transferred from one person to another.

Functional equivalent translations are sometimes criticized for being thought-for-thought rather than word-for-word. But all translation – indeed all communication through language – begins and ends with thoughts, intentions and inferences. For communication to be successful, the intention of the sender must be accurately inferred by the receiver. Since translation is communication across languages, it is not merely the transfer of symbols (words and sentences), but the transfer of meaning from person to person.

Of course the search for intentionality has been under serious and prolonged attack from advocates of the new hermeneutic, deconstruction, and reader-response approaches to biblical interpretation. For years the author has been presumed to be dead, or at least terminally ill. Yet recent communication theories have seen the resurrection of the author. Speech-act theory,<sup>24</sup> Relevance Theory,<sup>25</sup> and pragmatics<sup>26</sup> have all given renewed significance to speakers and authors, asserting the importance of intentionality in all communication, both oral and written.

Linguists draw an important distinction between *sentences* and *utterances*.<sup>27</sup> A sentence is a semantically complete unit of language.<sup>28</sup> "He hit the ball" is a sentence. An utterance is a sentence which appears in real life, spoken or written within a particular context. Suppose one of my children is playing baseball outside and I say to my wife, "He hit the ball." Later, watching a baseball game on television, I remark "He hit the

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<sup>23</sup> See especially Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); *idem*, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969). For application to literary works see Mary Louise Pratt, *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977); Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1990). With reference to biblical studies see Hugh C. White, "Introduction: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism," *Semeia* 41 (1988), 1-24 (this whole issue is devoted to speech act theory and biblical studies); Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 49-104.

<sup>25</sup> Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1995). A good summary of relevance theory may be found in Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, "Relevance Theory," in G. Ward and L. Horn (eds.) *Handbook of Pragmatics* (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming), available at [http://www.dan.sperber.com/relevance\\_theory.htm](http://www.dan.sperber.com/relevance_theory.htm). For the application of relevance theory to Bible translation see Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (St. Jerome, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983); Jacob L. Mey, *Pragmatics. An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2001).

<sup>27</sup> See Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 22-23., 63-64.

<sup>28</sup> This is a simplified definition, and there is significant debate concerning what constitutes a sentence. The one constant seems to be the idea of completeness.



ball." While these two are the same sentence, they are two different utterances (with different contexts and different referents). While sentences have potential meaning, utterances have actual meaning (or we might say actualized meaning).<sup>29</sup> Every sentence in the Bible is an utterance, since it appears in a context and has actual, not just potential, meaning.<sup>30</sup>

The meaning of an utterance is determined not by its linguistic components alone (which are the same for both of the sentences above), but by the whole life setting in which it is uttered. Linguists refer to the former – the linguistic components – as *semantics*, the meaning of the words, phrases and clauses. The latter – the total life setting – involves not only semantics, but other factors as well, including the *pragmatics* of the speech act and the *assumptions* of sender and receiver. Pragmatics refers to all the accompanying circumstances and contextual factors, including tone of voice, inflection, gesture, proxemics (the use of personal space), and cultural considerations.<sup>31</sup> Assumptions refer to all that the sender and receiver bring to the utterance, including knowledge of the language system, worldview, cultural perspective, etc. These three – semantics, pragmatics and assumptions – work together to produce meaning. For example, in American culture the gesture of winking may mean the speaker's words are to be taken facetiously, while in biblical culture it is usually an invitation to sin.<sup>32</sup> Assumptions determine the meaning senders and receivers assign to both linguistic and pragmatic entities.

We can now clarify the steps of translation. The translator, whose goal is to transfer the meaning from the original author to the contemporary reader, has two daunting tasks. (1) The first is to determine the intention of the utterance or speech-act through a detailed examination of its co-text and context. The translator must seek, inasmuch as possible, to identify the assumptions shared by both author and original readers and thereby infer the intention of the author. This inference will never be exact because of the differences in time and culture, and because all communication has a measure of imprecision. But through a study of linguistic and cultural data, the translator can determine with a high degree of certainty the author's intention and the relevance which the readers would have given to the utterance. (2) The second task is to determine how best to communicate this intention to the contemporary reader. This means identifying the body of assumptions which the contemporary reader is likely to bring to the text, and determining how thoroughly these assumptions overlap with the assumptions of the original author and readers. The goal must be to bring the assumptions of contemporary readers sufficiently in line with the assumptions of the original author so that they can infer the meaning which the author intended. Many of these assumptions will be similar, because of the commonality of human experience. Others will be different, because of differences in

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<sup>29</sup> By "real" we mean existing in a particular context. An imaginary character in a novel may produce an utterance.

<sup>30</sup> Proverbs in a collection like the biblical book of Proverbs are more complex, since they are relatively context-less and may be said to represent community wisdom rather than an author's discourse speech act. Yet proverbs do have both intentionality and meaning, derived from the assumptions of the socio-linguistic community in which they were produced.

<sup>31</sup> In written language, pragmatics are more limited than in oral communication, since no speaker is present. Yet some features, such as bowing down or tone of voice may be explicitly narrated.

<sup>32</sup> Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, 14-15.

language, culture and worldview. Bringing divergent assumptions together can be done: (a) by educating readers concerning the assumptions of the author and original readers (language, culture, worldview), (b) by using language in the translation which intentionally bridges the gap between these assumptions, or (c) by some combination of these two.<sup>33</sup> Of course all translations practice “(b)” to a certain degree, since Greek and Hebrew words are replaced with English ones. But how many of the assumptions should be set out in the translation itself? An example of different solutions may be seen Matthew 23:5:

**TNIV:** “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their **phylacteries** wide and the tassels on their garments long;

**NLT:** “Everything they do is for show. **On their arms they wear** extra wide **prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside**, and they wear extra long tassels on their robes.

The TNIV, together with most formal equivalent versions, uses “phylacteries,” a transliteration of Greek *phylacteria* (cf. NIV; NASB; NKJV; RSV; ESV). The NLT provides an explanatory phrase. The former requires education for most readers. The latter provides an explanatory bridge to the assumptions of the original readers. While both are accurate representations of the meaning, the latter would be more suitable for readers without a knowledge of first century Jewish practice.

Different readers will bring different assumptions and language proficiency to the text. This provides rationale for different kinds of versions for different kinds of readers, something advocates of functional equivalence have often stressed. In a work published in 1969, Eugene Nida asserted that in languages with a long literary tradition and a well-established traditional text of the Bible (i.e., languages like English), it is usually necessary to have three types of Scriptures:

(1) a translation which will reflect the traditional usage and be used in the churches... (2) a translation in the present-day literary language, so as to communicate to the well-educated constituency, and (3) a translation in the “common” or “popular” language, which is at the same time acceptable as a standard for published materials.<sup>34</sup>

Having summarized the nature of translation, we turn next to the theoretical foundation of formal equivalent translations.

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<sup>33</sup> Some advocates of literal translation have adopted a superficial understanding of Relevance Theory to defend the claim that translators should only reproduce the formal structure of the original text and allow readers to *infer* the meaning from this. But this takes one component of Relevance Theory – that all comprehension is a result of inference based on assumptions – and turns it into a theory of *irrelevance*! For communication to be successful according to Relevance Theory, the receiver must be able to achieve maximal cognitive effects at *minimal processing cost*. This assumes a set of shared assumptions – cultural and linguistic – between sender and receiver. If the basic linguistic assumptions (the meaning of words and the nature of syntactical relationships) are not present, the reader cannot infer the sender’s intention and communication fails. Relevance Theory must not be an excuse to leave the contemporary reader with the formal structure of the Greek but without the linguistic tools to infer its meaning.

<sup>34</sup> Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 31.

## The Goals and Problems of Formal Equivalence

When used in Bible translation,<sup>35</sup> the term “literal” usually points to formal equivalence in two areas: (1) lexical concordance and (2) grammatical correspondence. Lexical concordance means seeking a one-to-one relationship between words in the source language and words in the receptor language. Grammatical correspondence means using the same grammatical forms when translating from one language to another. For example, if the Greek uses a prepositional phrase, the English should also use a prepositional phrase. If the Greek uses an infinitive, the English should use an infinitive. Both of these goals are linguistically problematic and tend to promote a false view of language, communication, and translation.

### *The Fallacy of Lexical Concordance*

Lexical concordance means consistently using the same English word for each Greek or Hebrew word. Of course all translators acknowledge that strict lexical concordance is impossible.<sup>36</sup> The same Greek term *logos* can mean “word” (Matt. 7:24), “command” (Matt. 8:16), “message” (Matt. 13:19), “question” (Matt. 21:24), “financial account” (Matt. 25:19), “story” (Matt. 28:15), “matter” (Mark 9:10), “narrative account” (Acts 1:1), and a host of other things. Translating each occurrence as “word” results in mistranslation.

Basic principles of *lexical semantics* – the study of word meanings – make clear why lexical concordance is impossible.

(1) First, Greek and Hebrews words (called *lexemes*), like words in any language, seldom have a single, all-encompassing meaning, but rather a range of potential *senses*. This range of senses is called the lexeme’s *semantic range*. The context and co-text in which the lexeme is used determines which sense is intended by the author. All languages have a limited lexical stock, so that most words perform multiple functions. A speaker or writer chooses the lexeme which best communicates a particular sense in that context.

The Greek lexeme *charis* has a semantic range which includes various senses, including “grace,” “favor,” “credit,” “goodwill,” “gift,” “thanks,” “kindness,” etc. Consider the following utterances:

For it is by **grace** (*charis*) you have been saved, through faith... (Eph 2:8)  
 ... “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found **favor** (*charis*) with God.” (Luke 1:30)  
 If you love those who love you, what **credit** (*charis*) is that to you? (Luke 6:32)  
 He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the **goodwill** (*charis*) of Pharaoh (Acts 7:10)  
 Would he **thank** (*charis*) the servant because he did what he was told to do? (Luke 17:9)

<sup>35</sup> “Literal” means something very different (but equally ambiguous!) in hermeneutical discussion.

<sup>36</sup> An English “translation” which has attempted systematic lexical concordance is the *Concordant Literal New Testament*, produced by A. E. Knoch in 1926. Knoch argued that since every word of God was inspired, a translation should keep as close as possible to the original words of Scripture. He chose a single English word for every Greek word and consistently translated accordingly. The result is, at best, awkward and obscure, and at worst, complete gibberish. Romans 3:24-26 in the CLNT reads: “Being justified gratuitously in His grace, through the deliverance which is in Christ Jesus (Whom God purposed for a Propitiatory shelter, through faith in his blood, for a display of His righteousness because of the passing over of the penalties of sins which occurred before in the forbearance of God), toward the display of His righteousness in the current era...”

None of these senses represent the “literal” meaning of *charis*. All are rather potential *senses* within the lexeme’s semantic range. Most words do not have a single literal (core, basic) meaning, but rather a semantic range – a range of potential senses which are actualized by the utterance in which they appear.

(2) Second, words normally have only one sense in any particular context.<sup>37</sup> In the examples above, it would be wrong to assume that Joseph gained “grace” (= undeserved favor) from Pharaoh (he worked for it!), or, conversely, that we are saved through the “credit” we gain. While there may be some interplay between senses in various contexts, these senses do not *necessarily* force their meanings on one other. James Barr speaks of “illegitimate totality transfer,” the fallacy of assuming that the whole of a lexeme’s semantic range is somehow contained in any single occurrence.<sup>38</sup>

(3) Third, words may be synonymous, or nearly synonymous, in some contexts but not in others. There is seldom if ever exact synonymy between words, either within a language or across languages. In some contexts, the Greek lexemes *sarx* and *sōma* mean essentially the same thing, the physical body. In Ephesians 5:29 NIV, Paul says that “no one ever hated his own body (*sarx*), but he feeds and cares for it....” In many other contexts, *sarx* carries the negative sense “sin nature” or “fallen humanity” which *sōma* does not. Their semantic ranges overlap in some contexts but not in others. The same thing happens across languages. The sense of the English lexeme “grace” may overlap in some contexts but not in others with Greek *charis*.

(4) Fourth, all lexical choices are approximations of meaning. When I say “*charis* means ‘grace’,” I am rendering a judgment about the closest English equivalent for *charis* in this context. “Grace” is merely an English *gloss* which the translator chooses to try to capture the sense of *charis*. *Charis* may carry nuances of meaning in this sentence which “grace” does not, and vice versa. Furthermore, there may be two or more English words which function as well in this context – say “grace” and “favor.” Or one word may capture one nuance of *charis* slightly better, while the other captures another nuance. The selection of words in translation is an inexact science, and always entails some ambiguity.

Translators, then, must be in a constant mode of interpretation, seeking to identify English lexemes which reproduce the sense of Greek or Hebrew lexemes in each context. They may simplify their *method* by trying out the primary sense of a lexeme first. The primary sense is the most common one in a particular body of literature. But the primary sense cannot be called the “literal” sense. Simply replacing Greek words with their primary English equivalents without considering the contextual *meaning* violates the fundamentals of lexical semantics.

The differences in word meanings across languages are particularly evident when studying *collocational relationships*, meanings achieved through a word’s relationship with another word (called its collocater).<sup>39</sup> In English, for example, I can make pancakes, make trouble, make sergeant, make sense, make war, make a shirt, make friends, make a plane (= catch), make a deal, make a difference, make a vow, make love, make a law,

<sup>37</sup> The exception is puns and intentional plays on words.

<sup>38</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218. A Bible version which errs greatly in this regard is the Amplified Bible, often introducing many senses of each lexeme into each context.

<sup>39</sup> John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 75.

make someone leave, make Paris in one day (= reach). This illustrates the broad semantic range of the English lexeme “make.” But it also shows that the sense of “make” is often determined by its collocational relationships with other words.

This is significant for our discussion since collocational relationships change across languages. For example, we teach beginning Greek students that the Greek verb for “make” is *poieō*. Yet *poieō* would not provide an adequate translation for most of the collocates mentioned above. In Greek you do not make trouble, make a difference, make a vow,<sup>40</sup> make love, or make a deal. The inverse is also true. There are many collocates with *poieō* which make little sense in English. Below is a sampling of contexts in which *poieō* appears with various collocates. I have translated it “literally” in the middle column and then given an English translation in the right. I have taken these from the NASB to show that even a (supposedly) formal equivalent translation recognizes that (1) *poieō* does not *literally* mean “make”, and (2) there is no one-to-one correspondence between source and receptor languages either at the level of words or of collocational relationships. This is a very small sampling of just one lexeme.

Verse	“Literal” rendering of <i>poieō</i>	NASB translation
Matt. 3:8	<i>Make</i> fruit	<i>Bring forth</i> fruit
Matt. 6:1	<i>Make</i> righteousness	<i>Practice</i> righteousness
Matt. 6:2	<i>Make</i> alms	<i>Give</i> alms
Matt. 7:22	<i>Make</i> miracles	<i>Perform</i> miracles
Matt. 7:24	<i>Make</i> lawlessness	<i>Commit</i> lawlessness
Matt. 22:2	<i>Make</i> a feast	<i>Give</i> a feast
Matt. 26:18	<i>Make</i> Passover	<i>Keep</i> Passover
Mark 3:14	<i>Make</i> Twelve	<i>Appoint</i> Twelve
Mark 15:1	<i>Make</i> a council	<i>Hold</i> a consultation
Mark 4:32	<i>Make</i> branches [a tree]	<i>Form</i> branches
Mark 15:7	<i>Make</i> murder	<i>Commit</i> murder
Mark 15:15	<i>Make sufficient</i> the crowd	<i>Satisfy</i> the crowd
Luke 1:68	<i>Make</i> redemption	<i>Accomplish</i> redemption
Luke 1:72	<i>Make</i> mercy	<i>Show</i> mercy
Luke 2:48	<i>Make</i> us thusly	<i>Treat</i> us this way
John 3:21	<i>Make</i> truth	<i>Practice</i> the truth
Acts 7:24	<i>Make</i> vengeance	<i>Take</i> vengeance
Rom. 9:28	<i>Make</i> a word	<i>Execute</i> His word
2 Cor. 11:25	<i>Make</i> sin	<i>Commit</i> sin
Gal. 5:3	<i>Make</i> the law	<i>Keep</i> the law
Eph. 2:3	<i>Make</i> the desires of the flesh	<i>Indulge</i> the desires of the flesh

So what does *poieō* “literally” mean? Make? Do? Bring forth? Practice? Give? Perform? Commit? Keep? Appoint? Hold? Form? Satisfy? Accomplish? Show? Treat? Take? Execute? Indulge? Even the NASB – one of the most literal English translations – recognizes that it can mean any of these things (and many more), depending on its context and collocations. But the real problem is not that *poieō* has so many different senses (though that is true), it is that English and Greek say the same thing in very different ways. We could, for example, take any one of the *English* translations above – say “keep” – and build another list of *its* collocates (keep time, keep quiet, keep out, keep

<sup>40</sup> In English you “make” an oath; in Greek you normally “swear” (*omnuō*) an oath.

horses, keep away, keep records, keep shop, keep arguing, etc.). You would then need a variety of Greek words, phrases and idioms to express the correct meaning of each of these collocations. This brings us back to the fundamental thesis of this paper: Meaning must always take precedence over form.

The literal translator recognizes that *poieō* often does not mean “make,” but still argues that, inasmuch as possible, the same English word should be used for each word in Hebrew and Greek. But what is the justification for this? If the goal of translation is *meaning*, then the correct question is not, “Is ‘make’ an adequate translation?” but “What is the meaning of *poieō* in this context?” and “What English word, expression or idiom *best* captures this sense?” It is irrelevant whether the same English word is used in any particular case, or even whether a whole English phrase or idiom is introduced.<sup>41</sup>

Formal equivalent versions tend to seek one-to-one correspondence, and if the translation works – even awkwardly – then that translation is retained. There are two problems with this approach. First, since Greek words have a semantic range rather than a “literal” meaning, how do you decide which English lexeme to use for its one-to-one correspondent? To say that *poieō* literally means “make” is simply wrong – a lexical fallacy. Second, the attempt for one-to-one correspondence often blinds the translator to better ways of expressing the meaning of the original. Take for example Mark 1:17.

**NASB/ESV:** “Follow Me, and **I will make you become** fishers of men.”

**NIV:** “Come, follow me...and **I will make you** fishers of men.”

**NET:** “Follow me, and **I will turn you into** fishers of people.”

The NASB and ESV attempt one-to-one correspondence by translating both the verb *poiēso* (“I will make”) and the infinitive *genesthai* (“to become”) literally.<sup>42</sup> But the collocation of *poieō* + *ginomai* here means something like “make you,” “turn you into,” or even “teach you to be” (cf. NLT; TEV). While the NASB and ESV are adequate (= comprehensible) translations, they ignore the idiomatic nature of the Greek and so produce awkward English. Since the original Greek sounded natural to the original hearers, the NASB and ESV have introduced a foreign semantic element into the text.

Another example with *poieō* is **1 Corinthians 6:15**:

**NASB:** Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and **make them members** of a harlot?

**ESV:** Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and **make them members** of a prostitute?

**NIV/TNIV:** Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and **unite them with** a prostitute?

**NLT:** Don’t you realize that your bodies are actually parts of Christ? Should a man take his body, which belongs to Christ, **and join it to** a prostitute?

The NASB, ESV and NIV translate the Greek plural *melē* as “members.” The term *melos* carries the sense “a body part” and here refers metaphorically to individual

<sup>41</sup> See discussion below for the issue of word-plays and verbal allusions.

<sup>42</sup> Since *ginesthai* is an infinitive, a more formal equivalent translation would be “make you *to become*.”

Christians together making up the various *parts* of Christ's body, the Church.<sup>43</sup> In English we seldom use "member" of a body part, especially not in the phrase "members of..." The NASB also translates *pornē* with "harlot" instead of "prostitute," introducing an archaic tone absent from the Greek. The NASB and ESV then seek to stay literal by translating *poiēso + melē* as "make (them) members (of a harlot)." But the collocation means "join body parts with." The NLT is closest when it renders "Should a man take his body, which belongs to Christ, and join it to a prostitute?"

Now it is true that none of these translations reproduce *precisely* the meaning of the original. Nuances are certainly lost. But this is the nature of all translation. No translation ever reproduces perfectly the meaning of the original. But those come closest which accurately reflect the linguistic and cultural assumptions of *both* the original sender and the likely receptors.

While all English translations recognize that words can mean different things in different contexts, they often fall into the literal fallacy that there is one "literal" sense which should be retained for the sake of accuracy. The NASB translates Matthew 24:22 "And unless those days had been cut short, no **life** would have been saved..." A footnote alerts the reader that the word "life" is "Lit., *flesh*." In one sense this is true, if "literal" is understood to mean "non-figurative." The primary non-figurative sense of *sarx* is "body tissue" (i.e., "flesh"). Other senses such as "human body," "life," "humanity," and "sinful nature" are metaphorical expansions. But this is not what the NASB translators mean by "literal." They would never have written, "Lit., *body tissue*!" They have instead fallen into the fallacy that "flesh" is somehow the core or basic meaning of *sarx*. But "life" or "human being" is just as much a part of the semantic range as "flesh," and is clearly the sense intended in Matthew 24:22.

In some recent English versions, the designation "Greek" is used instead of "literally." The NRSV, ESV, NLT and the New English Translation (NET Bible) have adopted this designation. The ESV reads in Romans 3:20, "For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight..." A footnote alerts the reader that "human being" is "Greek *flesh*." While this may seem more sophisticated, in fact it compounds the error. First, readers are told they are about to hear a *Greek* word, but are then given an *English* one. To be accurate, the translation should read "Greek *sarx*."<sup>44</sup> Second, the note suggests that "flesh" is somehow closer to the Greek than "human being." But again, "human being" is just as much a part of the semantic range of *sarx* as "flesh" and is clearly the sense intended here. What the translators are trying to communicate is that *sarx* has a complex semantic range with much interplay between senses – an issue we will discuss later. The problem is, in making this point, they promote a false and misleading view of language and translation.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 258; "The word 'members' is a term for the parts of the body, thus suggesting in a metaphorical way that the believer is an integral part of the 'body' of Christ."

<sup>44</sup> To its credit, the ESV sometimes does introduce a Greek term in the margin.

<sup>45</sup> The NET translators explain in their preface that the designations "*Heb*," "*Aram*," or "*Grk*" "give a translation that approximates formal equivalence to the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text." (Preface to the NET). While this solves the first problem, it does not solve the second, which is the misguided claim that "flesh" is somehow closer to the Greek than "human being." Is there a solution to this? I would suggest that the NET translators reproduce Greek transliterations in the margin and then include a glossary of explanations for these complex lexical units.

Another example of this error is the ESV’s rendering of *doulos*. Acts 16:17 ESV reads “These men are servants of the Most High God.” While translating *douloi* as “servants,” a marginal note tells the reader “Greek *bondservants*.” But the Greek word is not “bondservant,” it is *doulos*. Of course the translators are trying to inform the reader – correctly – that *doulos* means a servant owned as a slave. But if *doulos* means “bondservant,” why not translate it that way? If the translators cannot decide whether the English lexemes “servant,” “bondservant” or “slave” most accurately represent the meaning of *doulos*, then the note should offer an alternate translation, “Or *bondservant*.”<sup>46</sup>

A third example of this error is the NRSV’s translation of the Greek plural noun *adelphoi*. The NRSV seeks to be gender inclusive and so consistently translates *adelphoi* as “brothers and sisters” throughout the Epistles. This is perfectly acceptable, since “brothers and sisters” is part of the semantic range of *adelphoi*, well attested both in secular Greek and in the New Testament.<sup>47</sup> This is clearly what Paul meant in these contexts. Yet whenever the NRSV translates “brothers and sisters,” a footnote alerts the reader that the Greek is “*brothers*.” This is a lexical fallacy. First, the Greek word is not “brothers”; it is *adelphoi*. Second, *adelphoi* does not have a literal meaning, but a range of possible senses. And in these contexts that sense is “brothers and sisters.”

All of this means that most claims – in both popular and scholarly literature – about the “literal” meaning of a word are wrong, based on a naïve understanding of lexical semantics. Sometimes “literal” is used in the sense of *primary* or most common meaning. More often, literal means “the first meaning taught to beginning Greek students,” as in “the literal meaning of *psychē* is ‘soul’,” or “the literal meaning of the preposition *en* is ‘in’.” Unfortunately, this meaning is often cemented in the student’s mind as the “real” meaning of the word. All others are derivative, somehow less precise and accurate. This is the fallacy of lexical concordance.

*The Fallacy of Syntactical Correspondence*

In addition to seeking one-to-one concordance of words, formal equivalence also seeks grammatical correspondence between the source and receptor languages. As with lexical concordance, this is problematic because languages differ – often radically – in their grammar and syntax.

Translations which claim to be literal are in fact often quite dynamic. Take for example the ESV, a recent revision of the RSV, which claims in its Preface to be an “essentially literal translation.” Compare the Greek original (transliterated) with the ESV in Hebrews 1:1:

Greek (UBS 4 <sup>th</sup> ed.)	ESV
<i>Polumerōs kai polutropōs palai ho theos lalesas tois patrasin en tois prophētais.</i>	Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,

<sup>46</sup> Sometimes the ESV follow this procedure, but inconsistently. In Romans 1:1 the footnote first offers an alternative, then reproduces the error: “Or *slave*, Greek *bondservant*.”

<sup>47</sup> See Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 147-151.



Lexically, of course, the ESV has changed *all of the words*, seeking English lexemes which approximate the meaning of the Greek. Grammatically, the ESV has radically altered the verse, rearranging the word order and changing five of the seven main grammatical forms. Two adverbs (*polumerōs kai polutropōs*) were changed into prepositional phrases (“at many times and in many ways”), another adverb (*palai*) was changed into an English idiom (“long ago”), a noun (*tois patrasin*) into a prepositional phrase (“to our fathers”), a definite article (*tois*) into a possessive adjective (“our”), and a participle (*lalēsas*) into a finite verb (“spoke”). The only grammatical forms which remain unchanged are the noun “God” (*ho theos*) and the prepositional phrase “by the prophets” (*en tois prophētais*). Even these, however, were interpreted and altered. The noun in Greek has an article (“the God”) which the ESV has dropped. The prepositional phrase *en tois prophētais* required interpretation, since the Greek could mean “in the prophets,” “by the prophets,” “among the prophets,” “with the prophets,” etc. The ESV has also changed the structure of the whole, turning what in Greek is a subordinate participial phrase into an independent clause.

None of this is meant to be critical of the ESV. All of it was necessary. The point is that every word and phrase was first interpreted and then modified and restructured to express the same meaning in English. An “essentially literal” translation – either lexically or syntactically – is a myth. It is ultimately irrelevant whether an adverb is replaced by a prepositional phrase or a participle replaced by a verb. The question that matters is, “Is the meaning reproduced?” As a method, translators may *choose* to follow the grammatical forms inasmuch as possible. This often works. But *in every case*, formal syntactical correspondence must be subordinated to *functional correspondence*.

In light of the significant differences between form and meaning, the ESV sounds oddly contradictory when it claims that “As an essentially literal translation... the ESV seeks to carry over every possible nuance of meaning in the original words of Scripture into our own language.”<sup>48</sup> We might cynically ask which they are trying to do, produce an “essentially literal translation” or “carry over every possible nuance of meaning.” Thousands of examples could be marshaled to show that these two goals – which the ESV treats as one and the same – are in almost constant tension.

Some Bible versions seem to consider it a virtue to provide as little syntactical interpretation as possible, leaving readers to wrestle with the differences between Greek and English grammar. But who is better able to deal with the idiosyncrasies of Greek grammar, translators with years of experience reading and interpreting Koine Greek, or an English reader who has never even seen a Greek sentence?

There is a common cliché that functional equivalent versions are for beginning Bible students while more advanced students will move up to the formal equivalent versions. I would like to turn this on its head and say that more advanced students – those in their second year of Greek or beyond – will find functional equivalent versions far more useful. Formal equivalent versions are indeed helpful for those with a rudimentary knowledge of Greek, since they reveal the structure of the text in a transparent manner. More advanced students do not need these, since they can see the structure by looking down at the Greek text! Advanced language students benefit from functional equivalent

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<sup>48</sup> Preface to the ESV, viii.

versions because these operate at the level of intermediate Greek, showing the syntactical conclusions reached by translator-scholars.

Let me illustrate this from my own teaching experience. Each year I teach both beginning and intermediate Greek. I jokingly tell my beginning students that I will repeatedly lie to them about the meaning of words and syntactical relationships. For example, I teach them that Greek *sarx* means “flesh” and that the genitive should be translated with a NOUN + “of” + NOUN construction, as in “the Word of God.” Neither of these statements is accurate, since *sarx* has a semantic range far broader than the English lexeme “flesh,” and since the genitive has a host of functions, many of which should not be translated NOUN + “of” + NOUN. But things must be simplified for beginning students. These students love literal versions like the NASB which translate using the simplified expressions they are being taught. Literal versions contain the “answers” to their first year Greek exercises. I encourage my students to translate literally at this early stage so that I know that they are recognizing Greek forms like genitives and infinitives.

When we move to intermediate Greek, however, our focus becomes syntax – the functional relationships between words. I teach my students that infinitives can express a variety of adverbial (purpose, result, time, cause, means, etc.) or substantival functions (subject, direct object, indirect discourse, etc.).<sup>49</sup> In many cases, to translate infinitives literally as “to” + VERB is to mistranslate them. At this point in their study, literal versions are of much less value. Students can see the formal structure of the Greek simply by looking at the Greek. What they *need* are translations which wrestle with *the meaning* – the syntactical relationships between words. I often keep *The Contemporary Parallel New Testament*<sup>50</sup> in front of me during our translation sessions. It contains three formally equivalent versions (KJV, NASB, NKJV) and five functionally equivalent versions (NCV, CEV, NIV, NLT, The Message). When we come to a difficult syntactical construction, we wrestle with its meaning and then look at the various functionally equivalent versions to see how teams of translator-scholars have interpreted the Greek syntax. While formally equivalent versions are a helpful “cheat sheet” or crib notes for beginning Greek students, functionally equivalent versions finish the task of translation by interpreting Greek phrases and clauses for English readers. Do they ever get that meaning wrong? Of course. This is the danger of all translation. But formal equivalent translations do not necessarily get it right. And when they *do* get it right, it is *not* because they have stayed “literal,” but because they have accurately represented the meaning of the Greek.

### **Some Cautions and Clarifications related to Functional Equivalence**

Though formal equivalence may “work” in individual cases, it fails as a consistent *philosophy* of translation. So what about functional equivalence? Critics have raised a number of important questions and concerns related to its goals and practice. We turn now to address some of these.

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<sup>49</sup> These categories are taken from Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics. An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 590-609.

<sup>50</sup> *The Contemporary Parallel New Testament* (gen. ed. John Kohlenberger III; New York: Oxford, 1997)

*"Equivalent Response" or "Equivalent Meaning"?*

A key issue which has generated much controversy is the stated goal of dynamic equivalence to produce an "equivalent response" in receptor language readers. Nida and Tabor write:

Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language.<sup>51</sup>

Here we have a question of definition, since "equivalent response" can be understood in various ways. Does equivalent response mean similar feelings or emotions in the receptors? Or does it mean full comprehension of the content of the utterance? Of course there is not always a clear line between these two, and Nida and Tabor point out that language has both an informative and expressive function:

Dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than mere correct communication of information. In fact, one of the most essential, and yet often neglected elements is the expressive factor, for people must also feel as well as understand what is said.<sup>52</sup>

They go on to illustrate by noting that poetry should read like poetry rather than dull prose, and the letters of Paul should read like real letters, not theological dissertations. This is certainly true, but the goal of producing a translation which expresses the same "feel" as the original must be careful not to distort the historical and cultural peculiarity of the original text.

I would assert that the primary goal of a translation is to transport the reader into the world of the text rather than to transform the text to fit the expectations of the reader. I prefer "equivalent meaning" to "equivalent response," since the latter can be misunderstood to mean creating in the modern reader a *culturally parallel response* rather than an *equivalent response*. In its most extreme form, this can erode into something like the *Cotton Patch Version* of the Gospels, where the rage first century Jews felt toward Roman crucifixion is actualized for modern readers by portraying Jesus' death as a southern lynching.<sup>53</sup> Though no functional equivalent translation goes this far, translators must guard against distorting the world of the text in order to produce a "parallel cultural response" in readers.

D. A. Carson expresses similar cautions, affirming the goal of equivalent response but with the important caveat that this relates to "*linguistic priorities alone*." He writes:

Clearly, a translation is poor if by preserving formal equivalence in word order or syntactical construction or the like it obscures the meaning of the original text, or transmutes it into something quite different, or remains completely opaque to those whose tongue is the receptor language. Moreover, selecting appropriate linguistic priorities requires a sensitive knowledge of the receptor culture, since there may be cultural associations between linguistic constructions and cultural values such that an entirely false impression is conveyed by a more direct translation...

<sup>51</sup> Nida and Tabor, *Theory and Practice*, 24.

<sup>52</sup> Nida and Tabor, *Theory and Practice*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John* (New York: Association Press, 1970).

...Nevertheless, the emphasis on equivalence of reception is open to abuse...the passion to communicate well may begin to overlook *what* is being communicated, for we have already seen that there are several goals the translator must bear in mind, including both accuracy and comprehensibility. To focus all one’s attention on the former (understood in the fashion of the most “direct” translation theories) at the expense of the latter is no virtue; to focus all one’s attention on the latter at the expense of the former is betrayal.<sup>54</sup>

In short, the translator must not betray the meaning of the text in its socio-historical context in the pursuit of contemporary relevance or emotional effect. I must add that more careful advocates of functional equivalence have addressed this issue well. de Waard and Nida carefully distinguish between exegesis, which is the task of the translator, and hermeneutics (understood in the sense of contextualization or “application”) which is the domain of the preacher and teacher:

The translator’s task may be described as being essentially exegetical, in that a translation should faithfully reflect who said what to whom under what circumstances and for what purpose and should be in a form of the receptor language which does not distort the content or misrepresent the rhetorical impact or appeal....The responsibility of the preacher or teacher is to take this message and to apply it hermeneutically to the different cultural contexts in which people now live.<sup>55</sup>

### *Retaining Verbal Allusions and Parallels*

A significant issue with regard to functional equivalent versions relates to verbal and conceptual allusions which are carried, at least in part, by the form of the text. Many of these are impossible to translate. For example, in an acrostic psalm like Psalm 119 each verse of a stanza begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with the psalm proceeding through the alphabet in twenty-two stanzas. This cannot be reproduced exactly in English, which has a very different alphabet of twenty-six letters.<sup>56</sup> Another example is the formal verbal play in Isaiah 5:7, where the prophet says that God looked for “justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress” (NIV). In Hebrew this is a play on words, since the words for justice and bloodshed sound alike, as do the words for righteousness and distress. A translator is hard-pressed to find English words which reproduce these wordplays, since they are based on the coincidental similarity of Hebrew words.<sup>57</sup>

In other cases, a more formal equivalent version may help to retain a verbal allusion. John 2:24-25 in the NIV reads “But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew

<sup>54</sup> Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence,” 94.

<sup>55</sup> de Waard and Nida, *From One Language to Another*, 40. Cf. p. 14: “The translators... want the receptor-language audience to appreciate fully the relevance and significance of such a culturally and historically ‘displaced message’. If the translator is to do his work well, he must become an intellectual bridge which permits receptors to pass over the chasms of language and culture to comprehend, in so far as possible, the full implications of the original communication.” Nida here uses language of cognition: “to comprehend...the full implications of the original communication.”

<sup>56</sup> While the *Hebrew* acrostic cannot be reproduced, its pattern can be mimicked in English. Brenda Boerger has translated Psalm 119 into an English acrostic (“Extending Translation Principles for Petry and Biblical Acrostics,” *Notes on Translation* vol. 11 no. 2 [1997]: 35-56). I am grateful to Peter Kirk for alerting me to this article.

<sup>57</sup> A translator could introduce an analogous translation in the receptor language, such as using the English alphabet to reproduce a Hebrew acrostic, but this still involves a change in form to retain some aspect of the meaning of the original.

all men. He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.” The next verse reads, “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus” (3:1). There may be a play on words here, with the reference to “a man” in 3:1 alluding back to the men/man of 2:24-25, and the author implying that Jesus knew Nicodemus’ heart.

Translators are faced with a double quandary here. First, the words man/men in 2:25 clearly mean “people” and are more accurately rendered by the TNIV: “But Jesus did not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need human testimony about them, for he knew what was in them.” Second, the NIV phrase, “a man of the Pharisees” is very poor English. English speakers would never say “he was a man of the Baptists” or “a man of the Democrats,” but simply “a Baptist” or “a Democrat.” This is a Greek idiom, not an English one. The TNIV corrects the NIV by translating “Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus...” But with its more accurate inclusive rendering, the TNIV risks losing the (possible) play on words with men/man in 2:24-25. (The TNIV phrase, “a man named...” may be an attempt to retain it.) Unfortunately, the translator cannot keep everything. All translation involves losses as well as gains, and translators must seek to identify the most important nuances and retain these.<sup>58</sup>

An area of particular caution is in the translation of parallel texts, such as those between Kings and Chronicles, among the Synoptic Gospels, and when quoting the Old Testament in the New. This last is particularly difficult, since the New Testament writers themselves are not always consistent, sometimes reproducing the Septuagint, sometimes translating the Hebrew, and sometimes interpreting rather freely (or some combination of these!). The important point to remember is that, if formal features carry *significant semantic content*, the translators should seek to retain this content – but only if it does not compromise other more important nuances of meaning.

### *Retaining the Ambiguity of the Original Text*

One of the main criticisms leveled against functional equivalent versions is that they make exegetical decisions which should be left to the reader. Van Leeuwen points to Romans 1:17, where the NIV translates the genitive construction *dikaosunē theou* as “righteousness *from* God” instead of “righteousness *of* God” (NASB; RSV; ESV). He criticizes the NIV rendering since it has “made an interpretive choice which prevents the reader from seeing that Paul may be saying something other than their translation says he says.”<sup>59</sup> Ryken discusses the same passage, but more naively asserts that only “the righteousness of God” is a translation, “the other renditions are interpretation.”<sup>60</sup>

Several observations are in order. First, *neither* of these translations is a “literal” or formal equivalent rendering. The formal Greek construction is NOUN + GENITIVE NOUN. The English translation is NOUN + PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE. English does not have a genitive case and so it is *impossible* to render it literally.<sup>61</sup> The false

<sup>58</sup> The frustration this engenders in the translator has been felt since antiquity. Rabbi Judah is reported to have said pessimistically, “If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar; if he add thereto, he is a blasphemer and a libeler” (*b. Kiddushin* 49a; from *The Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Nashim 8: Kiddushin, ed. I. Epstein [London: Socinon, 1936], 246).

<sup>59</sup> Van Leeuwen, “On Bible Translation,” 301.

<sup>60</sup> Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 86-87.

<sup>61</sup> English does have a possessive case, which is marked with an apostrophe “s” (“*God’s* righteousness”) But this is not identical to the genitive and none of the versions use it here.

assumption that “of + NOUN” is a literal rendering arises from the fact that this is the first translation Greek students are taught. But – much to the chagrin of beginning Greek students – the genitive has dozens of functions, some of which may be accurately and clearly translated with “of + NOUN,” others which may be *awkwardly* translated this way, and still others which cannot be translated this way. The genitive expresses various kinds of relationships between two nouns, or between a noun and a verb (adverbial genitives). Consider a few examples of the wide variety of genitives in the New Testament:<sup>62</sup>

Greek	“Literal” (of + NOUN)	Functional Translation (and classification)
<i>kurios mou</i>	Lord <b>of me</b>	<b>my</b> Lord (possessive genitive)
<i>kritēs adikias</i>	judge <b>of unrighteousness</b>	<b>unrighteous</b> judge (attributive gen.)
<i>pneuma sophias</i>	spirit <b>of wisdom</b>	spiritual <b>wisdom</b> (attributed gen.)
<i>naos sōmatos</i>	temple <b>of (his) body</b>	temple <b>which is (his) body</b> (gen. of apposition)
<i>probata sphagēs</i>	sheep <b>of slaughter</b>	sheep <b>destined for slaughter</b> (gen. of destination)
<i>koniorton podōn</i>	dust <b>of feet</b>	dust <b>from feet</b> (gen. of separation)
<i>angelos abyssou</i>	angel <b>of the abyss</b>	angel <b>from the abyss</b> (gen. of source)
<i>sophōn anthrōpōn</i>	wiser <b>of men</b>	wiser <b>than men</b> (gen. of comparison)
<i>ēgorasthēte times</i>	bought <b>of a price</b>	bought <b>for a price</b> (adverbial gen. of price)
<i>ēlthen nyktos</i>	came <b>of night</b>	came <b>during the night</b> (adv. gen. of time)
<i>dikaiosynēs pisteōs</i>	righteousness <b>of faith</b>	righteousness <b>by means of faith</b> (gen. of means)
<i>symmetochōoi autōn</i>	fellow-sharers <b>of them</b>	fellow-sharers <b>with them</b> (gen. of association)

In each case the translator must identify the *function* of the genitive and then find an appropriate English word or phrase to express that function. It is true that some functions of the English prepositional phrase “of + NOUN” overlap with the Greek genitive. But it is dangerous to assume in any particular context that this is the case. It is a syntactical fallacy to say the “of + NOUN” is the literal meaning of the genitive.

Our second observation arises from this first. In some cases it is very difficult to determine the function of the genitive, and translators must make hard decisions concerning how best to translate it. Furthermore, *sometimes* the English preposition phrase “of + NOUN” has an ambiguity parallel with the Greek. This may be the case in Romans 1:17. The genitive phrase *dikaosunē theou* may be a *possessive genitive* referring to an attribute of God (“God’s own righteousness”); it may be a *genitive of source* referring to a status given by God (“righteousness from God”); or it may be a *subjective genitive*, indicating an activity of God (“the righteousness shown by God”).<sup>63</sup> The English phrase “righteousness of God” can be understood in any of these three ways. Its ambiguity makes it a suitable substitute in this context.

But we must be cautious here. The ambiguity which translators experience was not the ambiguity of the original author. Paul certainly knew which of these meanings he intended and in most cases translators are able to discern the author’s intent by carefully studying the co-text and context. In such cases, they should express the functional relationship as clearly as possible. Consistently translating genitives with “of + NOUN” with little regard for their context obscures the authorial meaning of the passage.

<sup>62</sup> These examples are taken from Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 72-136. Wallace lists 33 categories for the genitive.

<sup>63</sup> For these options see Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 70-76.

de Waard and Nida address this issue:

Most ambiguities in the original text are due to our own ignorance of the cultural and historical backgrounds of the text. It is unfair to the original writer and to the receptors to reproduce as ambiguities all those passages which may be interpreted in more than one way....The average reader is usually much less capable of making correct judgments about such alternative meanings than is the translator, who can make use of the best scholarly judgments on ambiguous passages. Accordingly, the translator should place in the text the best attested interpretation and provide in marginal notes the appropriate alternatives.<sup>64</sup>

Seeking to retain ambiguity because of interpretational uncertainty often fails because the formal equivalent rendering either (1) produces only obscurity, or (2) pushes the reader toward one or the other of the interpretations (thus defeating the goal of ambiguity). For example, it seems to me the English construction "the righteousness of God" will be understood by most readers in the less likely sense of "God's own righteousness." The better solution is to put the most likely rendering in the text and others in the margin. This does three positive things: (1) It provides readers with the most likely meaning; (2) it informs them that the meaning is disputed, and (3) it offers other interpretive options.<sup>65</sup>

### *The Problem of Metaphors and Idioms*

One of Van Leeuwen's most important criticisms of functional equivalent versions is their tendency to reduce the metaphors of Scripture to abstractions. He notes that the NIV replaces the literal "walk in love" in Ephesians 5:2 with the rendering "live a life of love." He writes, "Metaphors are multifaceted and function to invoke active thought on the part of the receiver. Receivers must think and feel their way through a metaphor, and it is this very process that gives the metaphor its power to take hold of receivers as they take hold of it."<sup>66</sup> Walking in love "resonates with the rich system of biblical metaphor rooted in the Old Testament wisdom, where life is a journey on a good or bad way, and in Acts, where Christianity became known as 'the Way' (Acts 9:2)."

There is much to commend here. The metaphors of Scripture are rich in symbolic meaning and inter-textual allusions. Even older children can be taught to think through and understand them. In 2 Samuel 22:2 the LORD is called "my rock, my fortress." While most English versions, including highly idiomatic ones like the NLT, CEV, NCV and *God's Word*, retain both metaphors, the TEV renders "my rock," as "my protector." While this rendering may be helpful for younger children or people with low intelligence, the vast majority of readers can grasp it quite easily through reflection. In my opinion, translators should seek whenever possible to retain such metaphors.

A similar example is in Matthew 6:3, where the metaphorical idiom "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing," is rendered by the CEV as "don't let anyone know about it," and by the NCV as "don't let anyone know what you are doing." These two versions are explicitly geared toward readers with limited reading and comprehension skills, and so considered the metaphor too difficult for these kinds of

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<sup>64</sup> de Waard and Nida, *From One Language to Another*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> The NET Bible uses copious notes to offer alternative interpretations as well as lexical and syntactical data.

<sup>66</sup> Van Leeuwen, "We Really do Need," 32.

readers. Almost all other versions, including the NIV and the NLT, retain the metaphor. For Bibles geared for a general audience, the metaphors of Scripture should be retained, not reduced to abstract teaching.

But there is an important distinction which Van Leeuwen fails to make. This is the difference between *live metaphors* and *dead metaphors*.<sup>67</sup> Live metaphors provide their meaning indirectly, through reflection. In the phrase, “God is my rock,” the reader considers the characteristics of a rock and then determines which features apply to the subject and which do not. God is not “hard,” but he is “strong.” God is not an immaterial object, but he is a source of protection. A dead metaphor, by contrast, has lost its conceptual image in the minds of readers, so that they move directly to the abstract meaning. Consider the following metaphorical idioms:

He drove the point home.  
 She lost face.  
 That’s the last straw.  
 My salary is chicken feed.  
 He’s a couch potato.  
 We got our clocks cleaned!  
 That’s as easy as pie.  
 He changed his mind.  
 We must not lose our heads.  
 That is a far cry from what I actually said.  
 He kicked the bucket.

In these and most other idioms, the metaphorical “picture” has been lost (at least for most readers). The first idiom means something like “he made his argument well.”<sup>68</sup> Readers would not first envision either driving or a home. “She lost face” means “she lost social status.” No reader would envision a face disappearing. Nor would readers normally picture straw, chickens, potatoes, clocks, pies, minds, heads, distant shouting, or buckets with these others. The metaphors have become so familiar that the reader does not consider the “picture,” instead moving directly to the abstract meaning. These are dead metaphors. Translated literally, they would mis-communicate to readers of another language. “She misplaced her countenance” would be a poor translation of “she lost face.”

The problem for translators is determining whether metaphors in Scripture are live or dead. In the example of Ephesians 5:2, would the first-century readers have envisioned a pedestrian on a path, or had “walk in” become so common an idiom that readers immediately perceived it as “live in this manner”? This is a difficult question and requires careful study of the context and co-text of a passage. If other images related to paths, walking, or journeying commonly appear, then the metaphor is probably live. If not, it is probably dead. Of course metaphors may also exist on a continuum between dead and live, with some residual connection to the image for some readers in some contexts.

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<sup>67</sup> This is an issue practitioners of functional equivalence have discussed for years. See Beekman and Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, 124-150. Beekman and Callow provide criteria for recognizing live or dead metaphors and guidelines for translating them.

<sup>68</sup> Notice the collocation in this English sentence. In most other languages you would not “make” an argument.



Did Paul identify the Messiah as the “root” of Jesse (NASB; NIV) or as the “descendent” of Jesse (TEV) in Romans 15:12? When readers heard the Greek word *hriza* in this collocation would they have envisioned the image of a tree’s roots, or would their minds have gone directly to the abstract notion of human descent? Similarly, in Luke 1:69, is Jesus a “horn (*keras*) of salvation” (NASB; NIV) or “a mighty Savior” (NLT; TEV) (Luke 1:69)? The horn of powerful animals typified a mighty warrior. But a good case can be made that the metaphor was dead, and that the reader’s mind would have moved immediately to “powerful” without envisioning a ram or an ox.

This can be true both of word-metaphors and of metaphorical idioms. Consider Acts 2:37:

NKJV Now when they heard this, **they were cut to the heart...**

NIV When the people heard this, **they were cut to the heart...**

TEV When the people heard this, **they were deeply troubled...**

NLT Peter’s words **convicted them deeply...**

The idiom *katanyssomai* (cut, stab) + *kardia* (heart, inner self, mind, will) is formally something like “stab the heart.” Retaining this metaphor might seem like a good idea since it evokes a powerful image (it would certainly preach well!). But the metaphor was probably dead by the first century so that nobody hearing it envisioned stabbing, cutting or piercing. Their perception would have moved immediately to the abstract notion of deep conviction or emotional pain.

Consider Mark 9:1:

NASB “... there are some standing here **who will not taste death** till they see the kingdom of God present with power.”

NIV/TNIV “... some who are standing here **will not taste death** before they see the kingdom of God come with power.”

NLT “...some of you standing here right now **will not die** before you see the Kingdom of God arrive in great power!”

“Tasting death” may seem like an evocative image, but the metaphor of “tasting” was almost certainly dead, and the idiom meant “will not die.”

Again we see that all translation is interpretation, and decisions about whether the metaphor is live, dead or somewhere in between must be made. The translator cannot simply play it safe and keep the metaphor, since introducing a conceptual image to the text which no first century reader would have envisioned produces the wrong meaning for the contemporary reader.

### *Difficult Theological and Technical Terms*

Another difficult issue of translation is what to do with technical theological terms. Advocates of formal equivalence argue that traditional renderings like “justification,” “sanctification,” and “propitiation” should be retained since they are rich in theological meaning. Advocates of functional equivalence assert that these terms are often incomprehensible to readers and so clearer English should be utilized. The NIV retains “justifies/ justification” for *dikaioō*, *dikaiōma* and *dikaiōsin*, (Rom 4:25; 5:16, 18), while the NLT speaks of being “made right” with God. Both the NIV and the NLT utilize “holiness” or “made holy” for the traditional “sanctification” (*hagiasmos*; Rom 6:19, 22; 1 Cor 1:30; 1 Thess 4:3, 4, 7; 2 Thess 2:13; Heb 12:14).

Several cautions are in order for both formal and functional versions. Functional equivalent versions must be careful not to distort the meaning of the original by leaving out important nuances of meaning. Formal equivalent versions must recognize that if most readers cannot infer the meaning of the text, then the translation has failed. Consider the difficulties surrounding the translation of the Greek term *hilastērion* in Romans 3:25.

**RSV:** whom God put forward as an **expiation** by his blood, to be received by faith.

**ESV:** Whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith.

**NASB:** whom God displayed publicly as a **propitiation** in His blood through faith.

**NIV:** God presented him as a **sacrifice of atonement**, through faith in his blood.

**NLT:** For God sent Jesus **to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God’s anger against us.**

The Greek cognates *hilastērion* (Rom. 3:25), *hilasmos* (1 John 2:2; 4:10), and *hilaskomai* (Heb. 2:17) come from the language of the Old Testament sacrificial system. There has been a historical debate over whether the terms should be translated “expiation” or “propitiation.” The former carries the sense of satisfaction for sins through an atoning sacrifice, while the latter includes both atonement and appeasement of God’s wrath. The 1952 RSV was strongly criticized for rendering “expiation,” presumably leaving out the dimension of appeasement. The NASB and the ESV sought to correct this by translating “propitiation.”

But is this an appropriate solution? Very few readers – even Christian readers – have any idea what “propitiation” means. Of course they could consult a dictionary, but my computer dictionary does not include the noun, and defines the verb only as “to appease or conciliate someone or something.”<sup>69</sup> My desk dictionary – a 1500 page Webster’s – gives only the definition “to appease.”<sup>70</sup> This means even an intelligent reader would miss the primary sense of sacrificial atonement, unless they consulted either a more comprehensive dictionary or a Bible commentary. One has to question whether “propitiation” is an adequate *English* translation if readers cannot deduce the meaning even by consulting a dictionary.<sup>71</sup> If *hilastērion* indicates both atonement and appeasement, the NLT is the most accurate, since it reproduces the full sense: “to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God’s anger against us.” This is evidence that word-for-word does not necessarily mean greater precision or accuracy. The NLT uses fourteen English words to express the same meaning as a single Greek word!<sup>72</sup>

One of the most difficult translation issues in the New Testament is how best to render the Pauline technical term *sarx*. The difficulty arises not because *sarx* literally

<sup>69</sup> Encarta World English Dictionary for Microsoft Office, Macintosh Version X.

<sup>70</sup> Webster’s II. New Riverside University Dictionary (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984).

<sup>71</sup> Translators would do better simply to transliterate the Greek *hilastērion* in the text than to give an English word like propitiation which is meaningless most readers.

<sup>72</sup> The NET Bible is unique in treating the term as a live metaphor, rendering *hilastērion* literally (= non-figuratively) as “mercy seat. The justification is that the only other NT appearance of the noun appears in Hebrews 9:5, where it refers to the lid of ark of the covenant, the place where the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement (cf. LXX). The NET translates *hilasmos* as “atoning sacrifice” and *hilaskomai* as “make atonement.”

means “flesh,” but precisely because it *does not* mean “flesh” – that is, there is no good English equivalent for the Greek lexeme.<sup>73</sup> The English term “flesh” is commonly used of (1) body tissue, (2) the meat of animals, (3) the pulpy part of a fruit or vegetable, and (4) in special idioms like “flesh and blood.” Greek *sarx* has a much wider range of senses, including “physical body,” “human being,” “person,” “human nature,” “earthly descent,” “earthly life,” “human realm of existence,” “sexual impulse,” “sinful human nature,” etc. These senses have a great deal of interplay among one another, complicating the choice of the translator. The situation is especially complicated because of the specialized Pauline sense, which is both conceptually complex and theologically disputed. *Sarx* serves for Paul as a technical term for the eschatological concept of the old age of existence characterized by sin and death which is now superseded by the new age of salvation inaugurated “in Christ.” To be “in the flesh” is to live in the old realm. There is no good English word or phrase for this concept, whether “old nature,” “sinful nature,” “sinful realm of existence,” or “life in Adam.” All solutions have their own unique problems. The NIV goes with “sinful nature,” which may miss the eschatological connotations of the term and introduce the concept of two natures. Formal equivalent versions use the traditional “flesh” which may be susceptible to an inappropriate Platonic or Gnostic dichotomy between mind/spirit and matter. Because the English lexeme “flesh” has – through centuries of use – become for Christian readers a technical term with most of the same connotations as Greek *sarx*, translations produced primarily for Christian readers may choose to retain this term. Versions with a broader audience will want to find alternatives, or provide explanatory notes. In any case, this is a far cry from naively claiming that *sarx* “literally” means “flesh.”

#### *How Much Interpretation? When is a Translation a Commentary?*

As we touched on earlier, in addition to the linguistic obstacles that must be overcome, translators of the New Testament must also constantly wrestle with the differences in the background and culture between the first century and today. How much of the culture should translators communicate in the translation itself and how much should they leave for commentaries and teachers to explain? Literalist translators sometimes retreat into the axiom, “only say what the original text says; don’t interpret what it means.” But this is problematic, since the text “said” many things to the original readers which the modern reader cannot infer through a simple replacement of words.

Take a passage like Matthew 9:10, where Jesus calls Matthew and then attends a banquet at his home. Compare the following translations.

**Closest formal equivalent:** “as he was reclining in the house...”

**NASB:** “as He was reclining *at the table* in the house...”

**ESV:** “as Jesus reclined at table in the house...”

**TEV:** “While Jesus was having a meal in Matthew’s house...”

**NIV:** “While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house...”

**NLT:** “That night Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests.”

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<sup>73</sup> The literature on *sarx* is voluminous. See now Douglas J. Moo, “‘Flesh’ in Romans: A Challenge for the Translator,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation. Communicating God’s Word to the World. Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood*, eds. Glen G. Scorgie Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 365-379.

Which translation is most accurate? The closest formal equivalent, "reclining in the house," leaves out much of the meaning. It does not explain that Jesus was reclining on a cushion around a low table or that this posture indicated a formal banquet. Nor does it express the nature of first-century meals as rituals of social status. Some would argue that these ideas are better left to a commentary, but in fact they are all critical parts of the *original meaning* which the author intended and which a first century reader would have immediately recognized. None of them would be evident to a modern English reader. Because of the cultural and social differences, a literal translation leaves out much of the content which the original communicated.<sup>74</sup>

Some advocates of literal translation seek to distinguish between implied meaning and expressed meaning. In this case they would say only give the expressed meaning, "as he was reclining in the house." But this would require a change in our definition of translation. It would no longer be to transfer *as much of the meaning as possible*. It would now be to transfer *the minimalist meaning obtainable from the formal structure uninformed by historical or cultural context*. This new definition creates serious problems. First, intentionally withholding historical and cultural material invites misunderstanding. Second, the Greek words themselves have rich cultural content inaccessible from a simple reproduction of the formal structure. The Greek lexeme *anakeimai* is not synonymous with the English lexeme "recline" in this context. Its cultural connotation here is "to recline on a cushion around a low table at a banquet." All of these connotations were part of the word's *meaning* in this utterance.

Yet few translators would want to include *this much* of the original meaning in a translation. Translators must constantly draw a line as to how much meaning they will provide and how much they will withhold. There is no obvious standard here and the difference between translation and commentary is always on a continuum. Formal equivalent translations may choose to withhold much of the meaning by staying with the structure of the Greek. This does not make them more accurate or precise, nor closer to the meaning of the Greek. It just makes them a different kind of version which allows the reader to better see the *formal characteristics* of the Greek sentence. The implications and connotations which these versions withhold were part of the meaning of the utterance intended by the original author and understood by the original readers.

### *Respecting the Foreignness of Scripture*

Opponents of functional equivalence often bemoan the fact that these versions simplify the language of the text for young people and unbelievers. Ryken argues that literal versions are better because they preserve the exalted literary quality of the text and preserve its foreignness. He asserts that young people and new believers can be taught over time to understand its complex vocabulary and difficult style.

Van Leeuwen expresses a similar concern that in seeking to increase ease of understanding and reduce the processing cost for readers, functional equivalent versions "may silence the foreignness of Scripture and erase crucial otherness in God's book."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> These two paragraphs are adapted from my article, "Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation. Communicating God's Word to the World. Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood*, eds. Glen G. Scorgie Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 126.

<sup>75</sup> Van Leeuwen, "On Bible Translation," 293.

The Bible is a foreign book, with language, concepts and worldview very different from contemporary society. Removing this foreignness to make the text easy to read may distort the biblical message. By reading and re-reading a more direct translation, readers will gradually become familiar with biblical idiom and concepts, and so enter the world of the text. He argues that functional equivalent translations “underestimate the manner in which large, comprehensive *literary* works and their contexts generate interpretive ‘clues’ for meaning.”<sup>76</sup>

This is a legitimate concern. Translators must always be aware of the foreignness of Scripture, seeking to accurately represent its diverse genres in their unique historical and situational context. It is inappropriate, as the *Cotton Patch Version* does, to transform Bethlehem into Gainesville, Georgia, and Pharisees and Sadducees into Protestants and Catholics!<sup>77</sup>

But it is important to distinguish between foreignness of *content* and foreignness of *language*. While a Bible translation should certainly sound foreign with reference to cultural and social issues, it should sound *natural* with reference to its linguistic features. The language itself should be as clear and comprehensible to contemporary readers as it was to the original readers. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, which, though not slang or “street Greek,” was the common language of everyday people. It is true that some portions of the New Testament are more literary, others more colloquial. Some have a stronger Semitic style, others are more Hellenistic. A good translator will try to capture these different styles. But all of the New Testament sounded natural – that is, like Greek! – to its original readers. It did not sound like a foreign language – archaic, awkward or stilted. The best translation removes *linguistic* distance while retaining *historical* distance.<sup>78</sup>

An example of inappropriately removing historical distance is the oft cited (and possibly apocryphal) story of a translator in a tribal context who rendered John 1:29 as “Behold, the *pig* of God...,” because pigs were used as sacrificial animals and sheep were unknown. As Van Leeuwen admits, advocates of both functional and formal equivalence reject such a rendering because it distorts the historical meaning and loses a host of intra-biblical allusions to shepherds and sheep. He correctly notes, “the normative context for biblical meaning is the whole Scripture and *its* world. Bible readers need to learn what sheep...are and were in ancient Israel.”<sup>79</sup> It is important to retain historical distance and respect the world of the text. At the same time linguistic features should be modified to accurately render the meaning of the text. The NIV’s “*Look*, the lamb of God...” instead of “*Behold*, the lamb of God...” removes a *linguistic* archaism which was *not* part of the original meaning of the text. While “behold” may sound more “biblical” to many readers, this is because of its familiarity to readers of the King James tradition, not because of its affinity to the Greek. Van Leeuwen’s definition of “foreignness” must be carefully qualified to distinguish between linguistic foreignness, which should be eliminated, and historical context, which should be accurately portrayed.

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<sup>76</sup> Van Leeuwen, “On Bible Translation,” 292.

<sup>77</sup> Jordan, *Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John*, 16, 18.

<sup>78</sup> This point is made for beginning Bible students in Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1993), ch. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Van Leeuwen, “On Bible Translation,” 291.

Another point must also be kept in mind. It is certainly true that functional equivalent methods are conducive to producing simplified and easy-to-read translations. This is because they consciously analyze the meaning, not just the form, of the original text. Some recent versions were produced to be accessible to young people and those with limited reading skills (TEV, CEV, NCV, NIRV<sup>80</sup>). But this is by no means a necessary component or consequence of functional equivalence, which stresses that translations should be written in a clear and idiomatic style *suitable to the receptor audience*. They should not be Greek-lish. A functional equivalent translation which chose as its receptor audience educated and well-read adults would adopt the style of a skilled literary artist. Fine Christian writers like C.S. Lewis, J. I. Packer or John Stott do not "dumb down" their style or use only simplified vocabulary. But neither do they write in biblical idiom. The best translation should not sound like a translation, but an original composition which has the same meaning impact upon contemporary readers that the original had on the original readers. This morning I was reading Helmut Thielicke's classic little volume, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, translated from the German by Charles L. Taylor. I came across this paragraph:

A well-known theologian once said that dogmatics is a lofty and difficult art. That is so, in the first place, because of its purpose. It reflects upon the last things; it asks wherein lies the truth about our temporal and eternal destiny. And the arc of this question reaches from the morning of the creation of the world to the evening of the world at the last judgment; it reaches from the least, the prayer for daily bread, to the greatest, the prayer for the coming of the Kingdom.<sup>81</sup>

This profound bit of prose is not simple English. My children would not understand it. It is written for theological students and assumes some knowledge of the vocabulary and content of theology and biblical studies. Yet it is good idiomatic English, not "German-lish." The translator has not rendered the German literally, but has produced an idiomatic rendering appropriate for the intended audience. That is the nature of fine translation.

Van Leeuwen warns that "The danger of FE [functional equivalent] translations is that they shape the Bible too much to fit our world and our expectations. There is a danger that the Bible gets silenced because we have tamed and domesticated it."<sup>82</sup> This is an important caution, and we must never convert the Bible into a self-help book for the self-indulgent worldview of the West. But again, this warning speaks to the need to accurately depict the Bible's culture and theology, not to mimic its linguistic forms. Indeed, Van Leeuwen's warning against the "domestication" of the text can be turned on its head. Traditional church language, canonized by the King James Version and its revisions, can become so staid and familiar that it has little impact on churchgoers who have heard it all their lives. For many, reading a contemporary version brings the Bible to life by piercing through the traditional language "domesticated" through familiarity. Witness for example the rhetorical power of J. B. Phillips' *New Testament in Modern English* and, more recently, *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.

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<sup>80</sup> *New International Reader's Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>81</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, tr. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), .

<sup>82</sup> Van Leeuwen, "We Really Do Need," 30.

Much of what Ryken considers to be the exalted literary style of the Bible represents his preference for the vocabulary, rhythm and style of the KJV. For those of us who grew up reading and memorizing the KJV, it is the language of the church – “God-language.” But while this style has made a profound impact upon the English-speaking world, it was *not* the style of the biblical writers, which to the original readers sounded natural and contemporary.

R. T. France has said this well:

The colloquial language employed by Tyndale so that the Scriptures would be accessible to the ploughboy has thus become, with the passing of time, the esoteric language of religion, and the more remote it becomes from ordinary speech the more special and holy it seems.<sup>83</sup>

### *Entering the World of the Text*

A key question then becomes how best to master the historical and cultural context of the text so crucial for its understanding. Van Leeuwen suggests this is best accomplished by reading and re-reading the Bible as a whole in a more direct translation. He points out that like other large texts, the Bible generates its own relevance by “creating a literary world anchored in the divinely created world... The Bible is not just a book to read, but rather a book to read, study, and, as it were, *to live in.*”<sup>84</sup>

This is certainly true, and Van Leeuwen is surely correct that “translation is never enough.” But how do we “live in” the world of the Bible? The answer, it seems to me, is *in every way possible*. One problem with formal equivalent versions is that, because of their difficult language, they are *not* conducive to reading large sections of the text at a time. Readers of functionally equivalent versions are more likely to read texts *as literary wholes*, gaining a mastery of the sweeping flow of salvation history. This kind of reading should be supplemented with the study of Bible background books and commentaries which open up the foreign world of the text to readers, and, ideally, by learning the original languages to experience the vocabulary, syntax, style and rhythm of the original. For those who cannot learn the original languages (or whose knowledge remains limited), formal equivalent versions can provide an additional window to the text, alerting readers to verbal allusions and word plays which idiomatic versions might miss.

In the end, our goal must always be to unlock the meaning of the text so that it can unleash its transforming power on us.

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<sup>83</sup> Dick France, “The Bible in English: An Overview,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation. Communicating God’s Word to the World. Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood*, eds. Glen G. Scorgie Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 193.

<sup>84</sup> Van Leeuwen, “On Bible Translation,” 292, 298-303; quote from p. 298. The second of Van Leeuwen’s three main concerns with functional equivalent versions is that they “underestimate the manner in which large, comprehensive *literary* works and their contexts generate interpretive ‘clues’ for meaning.” (p. 292).