

THE ENGLISH HOLY BIBLE: LANGUAGE AND MULTIPLICITY

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Abstract

The English Bible has been known to have different versions, but before the first version was published, it existed in other languages. . It is not an overstatement that there is no other text that has enjoyed the number of translations as the Bible. These translations originate as a result of the fact that the translators had various perspectives to translations. There are, however, various processes it had passed through in order to be translated into English and other languages. In other words, it is these various forms of translations that culminated into what is now referred to as the versions of the English Bible. These versions are broadly classified according to the approaches of the translations- formal correspondence, functional evidence and paraphrase. Each of the approaches has specific characteristics that distinguish it from the other. Basically, the translations have led to the use of different words for the same message or content. This is plausible since some versions translate word-for-word, others translate meaning-for-meaning while some others paraphrase the whole text. Therefore, as a result of the existing varieties of the English language, approaches to translation and the intent of the translators, there has been a multiplicity of the different versions of the English Bible. Surprisingly also, the versions that share the same approach to translations still have various forms of discrepancies in both syntax and meanings. In other words, no two versions are exactly the same, the approach to the translation notwithstanding.

Keywords: Translations, Text-type, formal approach, functional evidence, paraphrase

Introduction

Communication is the most relevant objective of language. Succinctly put, language is the principal means of communication among human beings. It is an invaluable possession that makes us human. Without language, it will be practically impossible for human beings to understand one another, live in harmony and make remarkable progress. Language performs different functions depending on the situations or discourse. In certain contexts, language is used to bridge the gap among different speech communities. Over 2000 years ago, the English language and some other languages that can be referred to as world languages today, were either not in existence or not as popular as they are today. The emergence of such languages could be attributed to a lot of factors which include conquests and advancements in technology. With the advent of the English language, many texts that were not originally written in the English language were translated and notable among them is the Bible.

The Emergence of the English Bible

The English language has a remarkable history. Algeo (49) has summarized the history of the English language in the following words: “English, as we know it, developed in Britain and more recently in America and elsewhere around the world. It did not begin in Britain but was an immigrant language, coming there with the invading Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century”. Algeo (13), however, states that the ultimate origin of language is “a matter of speculation since

we have no real information about it. The earliest languages for which we have records are already in a high stage of development.” Today, the English language exists in so many countries, though with different varieties of the language being spoken and written. These varieties are as a result of geographical locations. Therefore, the language is far from being homogeneous. With the establishment of colonies, the English language has spread to almost every part of the globe and a lot of characteristics herald the emergence of the varieties. In his publication on ‘Writing the History of the English Bible: A Review of Recent Scholarship’, Bagley in 2011 has confirmed that the King James Bible (KJB) is the first Bible to be translated into English. The number of translations of the Bible suggests that it seems to be the most translated text in the world. There is obviously no text that has enjoyed the number of translations more than the Bible. In the words of Wendland and Noss (2), “the Bible is the most translated book in the world.”

The stories that border on the development of the English Bible are from different perspectives. This is a clear indication that the interests of the Biblical scholars and historical theologians and linguists have increased tremendously in a bid to take the theological content of translation quite seriously. The struggle for translation from the original language(s) of the Bible (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic languages) to other languages has become quite inundating in recent times. The primary objective of translation is also to communicate. In the words of Scorgie, Strauss and Voth (122), “translation is all about communication, and communication is by its very nature dialogical. It cares about its source and it cares about its audience.” This implies that translators take cognizance of the fact that in translating a text, it is important to consider essence, origin and the audience. So, the translators of the English Bible are expected to focus on the original language(s) of the Bible.

Approaches to (Bible) Translation

Metzger (35) has stated that “it is common knowledge that the Bible has been translated into more languages than any other piece of literature.” Some of the commonest versions of the English Bible include the Revised Standard Version, the Authorized King James Version, the American Standard Version, the English Standard Version, the New King James Version, the New International Version, The Living Bible. The Bible continues to be translated into new languages, largely by Christian organizations such as the famous Bible Society. According to Metzger (35), “by the opening of the year 2000, the entire Bible has been available in 371 languages and dialects and portions of the Bible in 1,862 other languages and dialects”.

Since most Christians do not understand the original language(s) of the Bible, and can’t access the original text(s), translators serve as intermediaries. There are, however, different forms of translations which translators choose from. The traditional approach to translation is the formal correspondence. This is the more literal word-for-word approach to translation. As Wonderly (19) succinctly puts it, “a translation that emphasizes formal correspondence is one that is oriented primarily toward the source message or the message in its original form.” This implies that there is little room for subjectivity with formal evidence and this translation process is the simplest form. However, the challenge with the formal evidence is that no two languages are exactly the same. In the words of Nida and Taber (1969), “each language is different from all other languages in the ways in which the sets of verbal symbols classify the various elements of experience.” This suggests that a literal word-for-word translation would be practically complex.

Owing to the shortcomings of the formal correspondence, functional equivalence was introduced. The aim of functional evidence therefore, is not to reproduce the form of the

original language, using the vocabulary of the receptor language. Instead, the aim is to communicate the meaning as clearly as possible using forms that are native to the receptor language. Hughes (190) vividly captures this as follows:

Functional evidence is perhaps better known as “dynamic equivalence”, a term apparently coined by Eugene Nida, who wanted to emphasize how a translation should produce the same psychological effect upon the modern reader as it was intended to have upon the original reader. Since 1986, however, the term “dynamic equivalence” has been replaced by “functional equivalence”.

There is a clear discrepancy between formal evidence and functional equivalence. While the formal evidence can be referred to as a direct transfer, the functional equivalence is simply an idiomatic translation. Hughes has also recognized the existence of another translation correspondence which he describes as paraphrased correspondence. He further identifies the Living Bible as a typical example of a paraphrased text. According to him, “the Living Bible Paraphrased was the work one man, Kenneth Taylor, who took the American Standard Version and rephrased it in his own words (1999)”.

There are various reasons why translations remain a challenge. While manuscript resources continue to improve, the English language continues to change. In the words of Scorgie, et al (177-180):

Translations of the Hebrew Scriptures became necessary by the third century B.C.... Translation of both OT and NT into Latin began very early in the Christian era.... The first extant independent Old English version of the gospels, known as the Wessex Gospels, comes from the tenth century.... But it was John Wycliffe 9c. 1330-1384) and his associates who first attempted to put an English Bible into the hands of laypeople.

The advent of the English Bible has led to the influx of variegated versions. Each of these versions is written according to the translators’ competence and era. Daniell (xiii), specifically states that “there are over 350 published complete English Bible versions, most of which have appeared in the 20th century, while part translations of the Bible (mostly individual books have reached over twelve hundred since 1945 alone”. The implication of the statistics given by Daniel is that by the 21st century, the number must have become quite enormous since literacy and interests in linguistics and theology have maintained an upward trend.

Translational Issues and Discrepancies

Translations vary for multiple reasons. Some of the reasons, in the exact words of Spackman (55) are “...different underlying texts and influence of the versions, different understandings of the text on the grammatical and syntactic level, as well as on the semantic or word level, and differing philosophies of how best to express one’s understanding of these differences in the target language.” Therefore, every translation can be viewed as an interpretation. In the course of interpreting, the translators may understand the source language but since languages differ at all linguistic levels, they must devise means of conveying the message and in doing so, a lot of meanings and registers get thwarted. Additionally, the different approaches play a major role in the course of the translations. The three approaches, previously discussed, have peculiar features and a translator’s work tends to focus on the features of the approach which he intends to apply.

Each version has its distinct diction which may create different meanings. Other versions definitely have variegated syntactic and semantic features. Some have been designed for easy

reading in modern English, others strive to stick very closely to the original text but are more difficult to understand; some have more study helps available and so on. Also, some versions are produced by particular denominations. These tend to highlight certain doctrines that are held by such denominations, often at the expense of accuracy.

One major reason why there are changes in the English used in these versions is the background of the translators. Another reason is the rationale behind the translations i.e. their essence. It is a widespread belief that one of the major reasons why there are discrepancies in the syntax and semantics of the expressions used in the versions of the English Holy Bible points to the changes that occur in the English language and the fact that each of the versions emanates at one point or the other in the historicity of the English language. Since one of the significant features of any language is dynamism, the English language, being one of the 'world' languages, changes (rapidly) over time. This explains why the first edition of the King James Version, which was translated from the original Hebrew and Greek in 1611 A.D., has a lot of 'very old English structures' that can be today referred to as having syntactic and semantic errors.

Theoretical Framework

The theory on which this research work is based is the text-type theory. It is built on the idea of equivalence and the emphasis is that the text, rather than word or sentence is deemed the appropriate level at which communication is achieved and at which equivalence must be sought. Reiss (1977:108-109) summarizes the functional characteristics of text types to translation as follows:

Informative: It is concerned with 'plain communication of facts': information, knowledge, opinions, etc. The language dimension used to transmit the information is logical or referential; the content or 'topic' is the main focus of the communication. **Expressive:** It denotes the 'creative composition' wherein the author uses the aesthetic dimension of the language. **Operative:** The purpose is to induce behavioural responses, i.e., to appeal to or persuade the reader or 'receiver' of the text to act in a certain way. **Audiomedial:** It refers to films and visual or spoken advertisements which supplement the other three functions with visual images, music, etc.

Reiss also proposes 'specific translation methods according to text type'. These methods according to Munday (2001:76) are as follows:

1. The TT of an informative text should transmit the full referential or conceptual content of the ST. The translation should be 'plain prose' without redundancy, but with the use of explication when required.
2. The TT of an expressive text should transmit the aesthetic and artistic form of the ST. The translation should use the 'identifying' method, with the translator adopting the stand point of ST author.
3. The TT of an operative text should produce the desired response in the TT receiver. The translation should create an equivalent effect among TT readers.
4. Audiomedial texts require the 'supplementary' method, written words with visual images and music. The text type approach moves translation theory beyond a consideration of lower linguistic levels, the mere words beyond even the effect they create, towards a consideration of the communicative purpose of translation.

In summary, the text-type functional theory concerns itself with the systematic process of translation which reveals the importance of functions of language in translation. It can therefore

suffice to opine that text linguistics or the text-type theory deals with texts as communication systems. A text can perform the communicative function if the content is the main focus. In other words, the main intent of the text could be to communicate facts, information or knowledge. Also, the motive could be to focus on creative composition or aesthetics. Then, the text could intend to appeal to the readers in order to persuade, dissuade, request or cajole them.

Methodology

The data used to identify the diction, features of equivalence and functions of the versions of the English were derived from randomly selected verses of the synoptic gospels. Textual analysis was used vis-à-vis the tenets of the theoretical framework to analyze the selected clauses from each of the verses.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Analysis of Selected Verses in the Books of Psalms and the Synoptic Gospels for Specific Functions (from the King James Version- Formal Evidence, Good News Bible- Functional Evidence and The Living Bible (Paraphrase))

| S/N | Function of the text-type | Examples | Approach to Translation/ equivalence |
|-----|--|---|---|
| 1. | (Matthew 13:1-3) Informative Expressive Operative | KJV: The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the seaside. 2. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. 3. And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, ‘Behold a sower went forth to sow; GNB: That same day Jesus left the house and went to the lakeside, where he sat down to teach. 2. The crowd that gathered round him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it while the crowd stood on the shore.3. He used parables to tell them many things LB: Later that same day Jesus left the house and went down to the shore, where an immense crowd soon gathered. He got into a boat and taught from it while the people listened on the beach. He used many illustrations such as this one in his sermon | Formal Functional Paraphrase |
| | (Mark 12: 10-11) Informative Expressive Operative | KJV: And have ye not read this scripture; the stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner. 11. This was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? GNB: The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all. 11. This was done by the Lord; what a wonderful sight it is! LB: Don’t you remember reading this verse in the Scriptures? “The Rock the builders | Formal Functional Paraphrase |

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| | | threw away became the cornerstone, the most honoured stone in the building. 11. This is the Lord’s doing and it is an amazing thing to see. | |
| | (Luke 21: 32-33) Informative Expressive Operative | KJV: Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all will be fulfilled. 33. Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away. GNB: Remember that all these things will take place before the people now living have all died. 33. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. LB: I solemnly declare to you that when these things happen, the end of this age has come. And though all heaven and earth shall pass away , yet my words remain forever true | Formal Functional Paraphrase |

Discussion of Findings

Since it is obvious that the formal correspondence in all the verses used makes use of the informative feature as propounded by the text-type theory, it can therefore be concluded that the reason for this is that the King James Version of the English Bible intends to translate the exact words of the original versions of the Bible, whose intent was to inform the readers. Additionally, subsequent versions that intended to avoid the word-for-word translations ended up with stylistic and more didactic features which resulted from the sentence-for-sentence translations and paraphrase. Thus, the expressive features and operative features of the functional and paraphrase correspondence or evidence became obvious. Also, a closer look at the Good News version, which is also in the same category with the NIV (as functional correspondences) indicates that, although they have a lot of similarities, there are still evidence of subtle disparities in both word arrangements and meanings of the excerpts from the two versions. NIV (Psalm 23: 2-3) reads: “He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me besides quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” The same excerpt in Good News Bible reads: “He lets me rest in fields of green grass and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water. He gives me new strength. He guides me in the right paths, as he has promised.”

Conclusion

In a bid to translate the Bible into English, various translations which are today known as versions have emerged in their numbers. The aim of a translation is usually to create a text in another language that is basically the same style as the original one. However, the different structures of languages make this a herculean task and almost impossible to produce the exact translations. This is evident in the discrepancies in the diction and features of the different versions of the English Bible.

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