

Translating the Word of God

STEPHEN NEILL

The best way to come to an understanding of the nature of language is to learn a language other than one's own. The best way to qualify as a translator is to have learned thoroughly a language other than one's own and other than the language into, or out of which, one proposes to translate. The translator has constantly to ask himself the two questions, 'What exactly did he mean?' and 'How do *we* say that?' Most translations of German theology into English are detestable, because the translators have not given sufficient attention to the second of these questions (and in some cases not even to the first). All this is highly relevant to the problem of Bible translation.

It is generally agreed that there are two main types of translation—the literal and the idiomatic. The literal type gains by its faithfulness, but may become unreadable and almost unintelligible. The idiomatic always involves an element of paraphrase, and if this is carried too far ends up by misrepresenting the original. The Authorised Version comes nearer to the literal type, though with more freedom in the choice of words than is always recognised; not because the translators did not know what good translation is—the notable Elizabethan translators such as Philemon Holland exercised a bold independence in their choice of words and phrases—but because they regarded the Hebrew and Greek idiom as constituting part of the inspiration of the text, and therefore exercised great caution in modifying that which they regarded as inspired. The same is to be observed in many nineteenth century translations; missionaries shared the veneration of their ancestors for the original text, and extended it to the AV from which in a number of cases they translated directly. The result has been the penetration of many languages by a number of Greek and Hebrew idioms which sound uncouth in their new dress. When the Bible has long been available and has passed into the minds and thoughts of the readers, this does not greatly matter. The phrase used in the Tamil Union Version of 1869 for 'the lusts of the flesh' might be understood by a Hindu reader as meaning 'a desire to eat meat' (very improper to the Hindu mind); it is unlikely that any Christian would so misunderstand the expression. Nevertheless it is generally agreed today that the idiomatic type of version is to be preferred.

To one who has undergone the discipline of learning another language thoroughly, grammatically and idiomatically, almost everything written in

the first book¹ will be self-evident. He will have mastered the art of *thinking* from one language into another. He will literally have acquired freedom of speech. So it was that Henry Martyn, freshly equipped with the best that Cambridge had to offer, was as one born free; in consequence his Urdu version of the New Testament is still the basis of that which is in use today. William Carey had to acquire that freedom at a great price, and never fully acquired it; so the Carey versions, monuments as they are of immense diligence, were soon superseded and none of them is in current use today.

We have to face the fact that the majority of Bible translators today have never had any philological training. They have never learnt their own language grammatically; they have never learnt any other language at all. It is for their benefit that books such as that now under review have been written. There is no doubt that this book can help them in their task. It may be questioned whether quite such elaborate analysis is needed at every point, and the accumulation of technical terms becomes irritating. But the writers have done their work competently. They have wrestled with the problems of the genitive (objective or subjective, Semitic or Indo-European?), and with the complexities (maddening in every language known to me) of the conditional clause. They rightly point out that at times a negative is best rendered by a positive; Paul's 'no mean city' should in certain languages become a 'distinguished' city. I do not think that they point out the other possibility—that a positive should sometimes become a negative. In Tamil, 'dear in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints' could easily be read as meaning that the Lord is delighted by the death of his saints. The correct translation would be 'not contemptible' in the place of 'dear'.

Careful study of this book is likely to render good service through replacing incompetence by competence. But good translators are rare, and the great translator is *rarissima avis*. To be included in either of these two brackets, a translator must possess two qualifications, which are not easily attained by the kind of study indicated here. The first is an ear trained in sensitiveness to the rhythm of a language. It is unfortunate that on the committee which produced the Revised Standard Version there was, apparently, no single member who had this kind of sensitiveness. In contrast to Cranmer, whose ear for English rhythm was almost perfect, our modern liturgical revisers have not shown themselves distinguished in this respect. The second is the capacity to recognise the quality of words. Words can be either base or noble, and of course they can move upwards and downwards on the scale. The Hebrew of the Old Testament is always dignified. Though the Gospels are written in *koine*, the Greek of their day, they are as far removed as can be imagined from the coarseness and vulgarity of the language of a great many of the papyri that have been recovered from the sands of Egypt. To sense this quality of words is a delicate matter. This gift was not given in rich measure to the translators of the Old Testament in the New English Bible. Poor Hagar, when already the mother of a thirteen-year-old son, is still condemned to appear as a slave-girl. (It may be noted that the word 'girl' occurs only twice in the whole of the Authorised Version.)

The second volume under review² is an exercise in the application of the theories of the new and, in some ways, obscure discipline called 'linguistics' to one area of human speech, discourse. The term seems to be used in a sense rather broader than that which it usually has in current speech, and to include all forms of human communication other than the single word.

Though the author does not quote Professor James Barr (nor, rather surprisingly, Professor C. F. D. Moule), she would agree with him that the unit of human speech is not the word but the sentence. It is admitted in the preface that 'the study of discourse structure is a relatively new field of interest in linguistics' and that 'this volume makes use of the concepts now being developed' (p. 5). The results are therefore to be regarded as tentative rather than definitive.

I must admit to having found the book rather difficult reading, not being at every point familiar with the vocabulary employed. I could have done with rather more practical illustration, from the field of translation, of the points being made. Of the illustrations given, largely from Papuan and Amerindian languages, some call out in the mind of the skilled translator no more than the comment, 'Well, if that is the way they say it, that is the way they say it'. Others, however, are really interesting and illuminating. It is often assumed that simple peoples will have simple languages; exactly the opposite is the case. English is perhaps the simplest language in the world, easy to speak respectably, almost impossible to speak perfectly except for those who are born into it. The languages of simple people are almost unbelievably complicated. Most westerners are familiar with only two types of language structure, the Indo-European and the Semitic. To these I have myself added two others, the Dravidian and the Bantu. But beyond these stretch types which will not fit into any of the grammatical categories worked out for other patterns of language, and which open out new perspectives on the infinite ingenuity of the human mind in developing the art of communication.

To the translator wrestling with the perplexities of these strange tongues this may be a very helpful book. On pp. 47-48 there is a particularly good example of the way in which a Greek sentence must be broken up into parts, if it is to be faithfully represented in an Amerindian language. I think, however, that the ordinary reader may find it, as I did, rather heavy going.

I conclude with three general remarks:

1. A constant watch must be kept on paraphrase and the extent to which it is legitimate. *Good News for Modern Man* is a paraphrase and at many points a good one, especially useful for those who are coming to the New Testament with no previous knowledge. But I forbade its use in my classroom in Nairobi, because it makes impossible any precise study of the Epistles of Paul. *The Living Bible* reads like a paraphrase of a paraphrase, at times brilliant, at others so free as to conceal rather than to reveal the original. If a paraphrase is used as the basis for translation, and the translator is encouraged to look for the dynamic equivalent, a polite term for free translation, how far away from the Word of God shall we end up?

2. The essential strangeness of the Gospel must never be forgotten. When it comes for the first time to a people, it opens up to them a whole new world, and introduces them to concepts which are wholly new and for which no suitable expressions exist in the language which they use. If we tailor our translations too smoothly to existing idiom, we may succeed in hiding what ought not to be hidden. I remember once exploding angrily in the Tamil Bible translation committee, when we had so smoothed out the complex passage Galatians 2: 1-10 as to conceal completely the tensions and confusions which underlie the apostle's twisted grammar. This we had no right to do.

3. There is no substitute for a deep and accurate knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. This cannot be expected of all translators. This makes it all the more important that there should be available for their help consultants who can supply this need. I am glad to find that there seems to be a reaction in the circles of translators in favour of this view. Those of us who spent long years in our youth in learning these languages were not wasting our time; we can provide something which is needed and which no-one else can supply. The only method for testing the reliability of a translation is constant reference back to the text in the original languages. This is a reality which nothing will ever change.

So Bible translation remains an exceedingly difficult and precarious art. There are no short cuts to success. Good luck to the Wycliffe (and other) Bible translators, in the difficult task, which they are carrying out with most commendable diligence and on the whole with humility, of making the Word of God known in a multiplicity of as yet unknown and unrecorded languages. *Soli Deo gloria.*

¹ *Translating the Word of God*, Joseph Beckman and John Callow, Zondervan, 1974, pp. 399., n.p.

² *Discourse Considerations in Translating the Word of God*, Kathleen Callow, Zondervan, 1974, 101 pp., n.p.