

The Emergence of Relevance Theory as a Theoretical Framework for Bible Translation¹

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Abstract

Ernst-August Gutt sparked a massive debate amongst Bible translation theorists and practitioners when he proposed that the communication theory known as relevance theory offers the best framework for understanding the phenomenon of translation. His work challenged the prevailing views of Eugene Nida and caused a divide amongst translators, some supporting a relevance theoretical approach and others criticising it.

The purpose of this article is to present a brief history of Bible translation theory, culminating in emergence of relevance theory in the 1990s as a proposed theoretical framework for Bible translation. The article will describe how relevance theory emerged as a theoretical construct for translation, offer a brief synopsis of major areas of research into the application of relevance theory to translation, and conclude by identifying a few areas requiring further research and reflection.

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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1. Introduction

Ernst-August Gutt sparked a massive debate amongst Bible translation theorists and practitioners when he proposed that the communication theory known as *relevance theory* offers the best framework for understanding the phenomenon of translation. His work challenged the prevailing views of Eugene Nida and caused a divide amongst translators, some supporting a relevance theoretical approach and others criticising it.

The purpose of this article is to present a brief history of Bible translation theory, culminating in emergence of relevance theory in the 1990s as a proposed theoretical framework for Bible translation. The article will describe how relevance theory emerged as a theoretical construct for translation, offer a brief synopsis of major areas of research into the application of relevance theory to translation, and conclude by identifying a few areas requiring further research and reflection.

2. The age-old debate: literal versus idiomatic

The familiar dichotomy of literal versus idiomatic translations is as old as the practice of Bible translation itself. The first translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek, the Septuagint (LXX), varies from near wooden literalism in some places to virtual paraphrase in others (Nida 1996). Other early Greek translations of the Old Testament confirm that both literal and idiomatic approaches were familiar to ancient translators. Aquila’s translation (ca. A.D. 130) stuck to the Hebrew text with such literalness as to make it almost incomprehensible to Greek speakers who did not understand Hebrew. By contrast, the versions produced by Symmachus and Theodotion (late 2nd century A.D.) both rendered the Old Testament into stylistic, idiomatic Greek.³

³ Significantly, even these early translations reflect the impact that the background of the translator and the purpose for which he/she is translating upon the philosophy used. Aquila was a devout Jew whose translation is said to have been “executed for the express purpose of opposing the authority of the Septuagint” (Brenton 1976:v). His motivation explains his literal approach. Symmachus and Theodotion were respectively “a kind of semi-Christian” and a Jewish proselyte (cf. Brenton 1976:v). Their motivation was not to defend the authority of the

The Vulgate reflects similar theoretical tensions. Jerome himself admitted that his normal practice when translating was to translate "sense for sense and not word for word" (quoted in Comfort 1991, chapter 7). Yet when it came to translating the Bible, he "felt the compulsion to render word for word". Nevertheless, the resultant Vulgate was much closer to the language of the common man than other Latin translations in circulation. In spite of Jerome's belief that literalness was necessary, he could not break away from his customary habit of translating idiomatically (a method he had probably learned through the influence of leading Roman translators, most notably Cicero).

The next major figure in the history of Bible translation theory was Martin Luther. Luther argued for an idiomatic approach that makes the Bible understandable to the masses. Nida (1964:14-15) believes "Luther deserves full credit for having sensed the importance of full intelligibility.... [H]e also carefully and systematically worked out the implications of his principles of translation." Luther applied his theory in his German translation of the New Testament. Three other men also published lists of translation principles that tended toward a thought for thought approach. They were Etienne Dolet in 1540, George Campbell in 1789, and Alexander Tytler (who plagiarised Campbell) in 1790.

From the fact that almost everyone who wrote about translation theory from A.D. 1500 to 1800 argued for an idiomatic approach, it would be natural to assume that this was the dominant method during that period. However, the opposite is the case, at least as far as English Bible translations were concerned.⁴ Every major English translation of the Bible up to and including the publication of the ASV in 1901 was essentially literal in its approach (Bruce 1978). Literal rendering was the default method of translation. Those who wrote about translation theory often did so because they found the default

Hebrew text but to make its message understandable, perhaps for the purpose of proselyting Greeks.

⁴ Hermans (1999:74), by means of his comment on the tendency of "eighteenth-century European translators ... to disambiguate words or passages", implies that idiomatic translation was the dominant approach to general translation during this period. Literal translation did, however, dominate English Bible translation throughout this period.

method unacceptable and wanted to swing the pendulum toward more idiomatic rendering.

By the time that the RV (1885) was commissioned in 1870, the influence of these attempts had certainly been felt. Two distinct schools of thought were present amongst the group of scholars commissioned for the task. Those trained at Oxford “aimed at conveying the sense of the original in free idiomatic English without too much regard for the precise wording of the former” (Metzger 1993a:146). Those trained at Cambridge, however, “paid meticulous attention to verbal accuracy, so as to translate as literally as possible without positive violence to English usage, or positive misrepresentation of the author’s meaning, and to leave it to the reader to discern the sense from the context.”

The latter method prevailed as far as the RV and its American counterpart the ASV were concerned, but it was not long thereafter that significant idiomatic Bible translations began to appear, most notably those by James Moffatt (1913) and Edgar Goodspeed (1923). However, although these idiomatic translations were gaining in influence, they were far from taking over as the dominant approach to translation. This is evidenced by the fact that the next major English translation, the RSV (1952), was once again a strictly literal rendering. Thus it is fair to say that right up until the 1950s formal equivalence was the dominant approach to Bible translation in the English speaking world.

3. Eugene Nida: the rise of dynamic equivalence

During the first half of the twentieth-century there was mounting pressure to produce Bible translations that would “speak to their readers” as the original biblical texts “spoke to their readers”. Goodspeed (1937:113) reflects this pressure: “I wanted my translation to make on the reader something of the impression the New Testament must have made on its earliest readers.” Phillips had similar goals in producing *The New Testament in Modern English*. He explains his objectives as follows:

I still feel that the most important “object of the exercise” is communication. I see it as my job as one who knows Greek pretty well and ordinary English very well to convey the living

quality of the N.T. documents. I want above all to create in my readers the same emotions as the original writings evoked nearly 2,000 years ago (Phillips 1972:viii).⁵

The emergence of neo-orthodoxy with its claim that the Bible should "speak to us" was one of the major ideological influences behind this trend (Thomas 1990b). Conservative Christians, however, would never openly embrace something it perceived to have roots in neo-orthodoxy. In fact, belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible had been the main reason formal equivalence had dominated for so long. If idiomatic approaches to Bible translation were to become the norm they would need to be theoretically justified on non-theological grounds.

The scene was set for the entrance of Eugene Nida, whose publications in the 1960s proved to be a major turning point for Bible translation theory. The two landmark works were *Toward a Science of Translating* (Nida 1964) and *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Nida and Taber 1969). Nida, an evangelical Christian with a strong desire to produce translations that could serve as missionary tools, assumed that translation falls within the general domain of communication. He based his theory on the prevailing code-model of communication. In so doing, he made two fundamental assumptions: (a) any message can be communicated to any audience in any language provided that the most effective form of expression is found; (b) humans share a core of universal experience which makes such communication possible.

Working with these as his starting assumptions, Nida applied insights from the rapidly developing field of linguistics to develop a scientific approach to translation. By applying the latest linguistic advances to translation theory he was able to provide theoretically sound reasons for translating the Bible idiomatically rather than literally. Thus he managed to persuade the world of Bible translators that dynamic equivalence (later called functional equivalence, De Waard and Nida 1986) was more than a just reader-friendly method of translation; it was a scientific method.

⁵ Although Phillips wrote these words in 1972, he was describing his motivation for a task he began in 1941.

To Nida the goal of translation is to produce an equivalent message, that is, to reproduce "the total dynamic character of the [original] communication" (Nida 1964:120). Translation can therefore be defined as "the reproduction in a receptor language of the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning, and second in terms of style" (Nida & Taber 1969:12). If the meaning and style of the receptor language text faithfully reproduces that of its source, then the effect it has upon its readers should be similar to that of its source. Consequently, dynamic equivalence can be defined in terms of equivalence of receptor response. Nida and Taber (1969:24) put it this way:

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. This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose.

The question is, "How does one go about transferring the message from the source to the receptor language in such a way that it retains the dynamics of the original?" This is where linguistics comes into play.

Nida did not limit himself to one particular school of linguistic thought, but drew from a variety of schools. The most important aspect of his methodology was *generative-transformational grammar*, which he adapted and simplified from Noam Chomsky (1957; 1965; 1972).⁶ In short, Nida argued that languages consist of surface structures and deep structures (kernels), and that structural differences between languages are much smaller at a deep than at a surface level. Consequently, the best way to translate is to reduce the source text to kernel sentences, transfer these into the receptor language, and then

⁶ For a full description of how Nida adapted and simplified Chomsky's ideas in order to apply them to translation, see Genzler 1993:44-60.

reformulate to form a natural receptor-language text.⁷ Nida complemented this approach with a synchronic approach to lexical study in which he grouped words into semantic domains and then analysed their relations of synonymy, hyponymy and antonymy using the technique known as *componential analysis* (Nida 1975b).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Nida’s views were indeed scientific, being based on the best available linguistic theory. As a result, they dominated Bible translation theory for the remainder of the twentieth century, forming the backbone of the translation approaches adopted by the United Bible Societies and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Many of the leading translation theorists of the past 30 years—Beekman & Callow (1974), Wilss (1982), Larson (1984)—have simply built upon the foundation he laid.

His impact upon Bible translation practice has also been pervasive. The influence of functional equivalence is most explicitly seen in the number of translations that have openly embraced its ideology and methodology, such as the CEV, GNB, NET, NIV and NLT, to name just a few. What is even more telling is that its influence is also evident in those translations that have not officially embraced it. The NRSV is a good example of this. Although it officially claims to be a literal translation, it is considerably more idiomatic than its predecessor (RSV). Who can argue with Carson’s (1993:41) conclusion that “dynamic (or functional) equivalence has triumphed, whether the expression itself be embraced or not; even among translators who think of their work as more ‘literal,’ its influence is pervasive”?

4. Ernst-August Gutt: a relevance theoretic account

The publication of *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Sperber & Wilson 1986) paved the way for the first significant theoretical challenge to functional equivalence’s claim to being the most scientific available approach to Bible translation.⁸ Sperber and Wilson undermined the foundation on which

⁷ The technique is fully described in Nida and Taber 1969, chapter 3.

⁸ This does not imply that functional equivalence had achieved complete acceptance. There remained plenty who objected to it, but they usually based their objections on theological

functional equivalence was built when they argued that the code model is not the best theory of communication. In its place they proposed an inferential model, which they called *relevance theory*. The central tenet of relevance theory is that communication does not take place solely by encoding and decoding processes, but by the communicator providing evidence of his/her communicative intention. This evidence may be linguistically encoded, contextually inferred, or a combination of these two.

Sperber and Wilson may have paved the way, but it was Ernst-August Gutt who pointed out the theoretical implications that relevance theory has for translation theory.⁹ In *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (Gutt 1991; 2nd edition in 2000), he argued that relevance theory provides the much needed framework for understanding translation. Gutt (2000:202) distinguishes between “*approaches* to translation” and “*accounts* of translation”.¹⁰ Approaches to translation refer to different translation methods, whereas accounts of translation denote attempts to clarify “what this phenomenon is all about, what its nature and characteristics are”. Although Gutt discusses various approaches to translation and even advocates two of his own, *his main goal is to provide a unified account of translation*. He makes this emphatically clear in the second edition, saying “this book intends to be a (theoretical) *account* of translation; its focus is to explain how the phenomenon of translation works. It does not constitute or advocate a particular way of translating” (2000:203).

His objective is thus broader than that of Nida. Whereas Nida set out to develop a method of translation, Gutt tried to formulate a comprehensive theory of translation. When compared with each other, Nida’s work was more

rather than linguistic criteria (see, for example, Thomas 1990a-b). As such their objections could not undermine functional equivalence’s claim to being a theoretically sound approach.

⁹ There have also been some minor studies—independent of Gutt—regarding the value of relevance theory for Bible translation. For example, Ferdinand Deist (1992) argued that relevance theory can help with the “(a) disambiguation of ambiguous constituents, (b) assigning referents to terms, and (c) the enrichment of vague terms or forms.”

¹⁰ Although Gutt only makes this distinction explicit in the second edition of *Translation and relevance: Cognition and context* (2000), the distinction is consistently implied in his earlier works.

prescriptive, Gutt's more descriptive. Gutt's account of translation certainly has far-reaching implications for the development of new approaches to translation, but these are incidental to his main objective.

Relevance theory exposed a serious fallacy in one of the key tenets of meaning-based approaches to translation.¹¹ If communication is solely a matter of encoding and decoding messages, as the code model of communication claimed, then any message can be communicated to any audience. However, if communication is highly context dependent, being inferred from both verbal (linguistically encoded) and contextual clues, as relevance theory demonstrates, then it is not always possible to convey any message to any audience just by finding the best way of encoding it.

Gutt argues that meaning-based approaches fail to take the highly context-dependent nature of communication seriously enough. As a result their explanation of how successful translation can take place is inadequate because they have no satisfactory way of conveying the contextually derived implications of the source text to readers whose contextual environment differs markedly from that of the original readers. Consequently, they cannot achieve their aim of communicating the meaning of the original. Since they fail to achieve their stated aim, they cannot provide a comprehensive account of translation.

Gutt proceeds to offer his account of translation by exploiting relevance theory's two categories of reported speech—direct and indirect quotation. In direct quotation, one aims to report exactly what another person said. Indirect quotation has a more modest aim, namely, to convey only an approximation of what somebody else said; a third party will expect to retrieve only part of the original message. Gutt presents translation as interlingual reported speech. Corresponding to the two types of intralingual quotation, he proposes two types of translation: (a) direct translation, which aims to convey the whole message of the source and (b) indirect translation, which seeks to

¹¹ Gutt regards Nida (1964), Nida and Taber (1969), Beekman and Callow (1974) and Larson (1984) as representatives of this approach. He equates meaning-based approaches with dynamic or functional equivalence.

convey only the parts of the source that are deemed relevant to the receptor audience.

Indirect translation accepts the fact that the whole meaning of the original cannot be conveyed across contextual chasms. It is nevertheless a valid form of translation, one in which the translator does not purport to convey all the assumptions of the original but only those that are deemed relevant to the receptor audience. Indirect translation is “a flexible, context-sensitive concept of translation ... which allows for very different types of target texts to be called translation” (Fawcett 1997:138); it is suitable for translation situations in which the translator does not need to convey all the assumptions of the original to the receptor readers.

Direct translation meets the need for a kind of translation that does try to convey the explicit content of the original (Gutt 2000:129). Direct translation is a kind of interlingual direct quotation in which the translation aims to preserve the linguistic properties of the original. To compensate for the structural differences between languages, these linguistic properties are defined in terms of the communicative clues they provide rather than by their formal elements.¹² By retaining all the communicative clues of the original, direct translation enables readers to recover the full author-intended meaning of the original *provided they use the contextual assumptions envisaged for the original* to interpret the translated text. This “fixed, context-independent” (Fawcett 1997:138) approach enables Gutt to account for those kinds of translation situations where the receptors require the translation “to somehow stick to the explicit content of the original” (Gutt 2000:129).

Gutt believes he has provided a unified account of translation since both direct and indirect translation are forms of interlingual interpretive use of language.

5. Responses to Gutt’s relevance theoretical account

Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context (Gutt 1991) elicited widespread response from translation theorists. Early reviews ranged from

¹² This sharply distinguishes direct translation from formal equivalence.

highly positive (Winckler & Van der Merwe 1993; Evans 1997; Van der Merwe 1999) through those who find it theoretically interesting but practically unhelpful (Malmkjær 1992; Tirkkonen-Condit 1992; Fawcett 1997) to ardent opposition (Wendland 1996a & b; 1997). A survey of the kind of dialogue that has emerged should help to identify areas that are especially open to further investigation.

4.1. Critical responses

Perhaps the most common criticism of Gutt (1991) has been that he fails to provide translators with anything of practical value. Malmkjær’s (1992:306) complaint that “if they [translators] want direct help with their everyday concerns, they should not expect to find it here” is a typical example. Wendland (1996b; 1997), similarly, objects on the grounds that the principle of relevance is too vague a concept to be of practical value to translators; it does not provide them with the kind of concrete help they need when (a) making translation decisions or (b) evaluating the faithfulness of translated texts.

Another common objection is that the distinction between direct and indirect translation is little more than the age old dichotomy of literal versus idiomatic translation, form versus meaning—just with more attention being paid to source and receptor contexts (Wendland 1997:87). This criticism regards direct translation as being synonymous with formal equivalence. Wendland (1997:86) accuses Gutt of making “an elaborate, theoretically-based effort to justify what is commonly termed a ‘literal’ approach to Bible translation”. Even Sequeiros (1998), who does not view direct and indirect translation as different names for literal and idiomatic translation, regards direct translation as being similar to literal translation, with a strong focus on formal elements.

A third objection is that by advocating resemblance in relevant respects indirect translation opens the door for translators to distort the meaning of the source text in order to make it optimally relevant to their readers (Sappire 1994; Wendland 1996b).

4.2. Positive responses

Gutt has also received a number of positive reviews, hailing his work as a significant advance in translation *theory*. Winckler & Van der Merwe (1993) were among the first writers to explore the practical implications of *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (Gutt 1991) for Bible translation. They embrace a relevance theoretic account of translation as an improvement over previous code-model based accounts. Working on that assumption, they attempt to summarise "the positive conclusions argued for by Gutt" into fourteen "pointers" to guide Bible translators. These pointers represent an attempt to expound some of the implications of Gutt's work and present them in a more user-friendly format so as to make them more readily available to translators. The practical value of the article lies (a) in the excellent definitions it provides of direct and indirect translation and (b) in its tentative proposal about the kinds of analysis translators should include in their search for a text's communicative clues.

Evans (1997) claims that the relevance theoretic definition of context and the nature of its understanding of implications derived from figurative language implies that translators should try to translate many figurative expressions quite literally. The reason for this is that the co-text of a discourse plays a crucial role in generating the cognitive environment with which the reader will interpret the remainder of the discourse.

In the course of discussing the need for a concordant translation of the Bible in Afrikaans, Van der Merwe (1999) delves into some of the practicalities of producing a direct translation.¹³ He wrestles with whether or not such a translation is justifiable in terms of its target audience, its cumbersomeness, and its costliness. He argues that within a Bible reading community, the majority of readers prefer a functionally equivalent type of translation,¹⁴ but a small nucleus of "serious Bible readers" would prefer a more literal rendering

¹³ Van der Merwe's use of the term "concordant translation" in this article corresponds closely to his definition of a "direct translation" in an earlier article (see Winckler & Van der Merwe 1993:53-54).

¹⁴ That is, in relevance theoretic terms, indirect translations.

in which less of the interpretive decisions are made for them. However, he foresees several problems, mostly brought about by the relatively small number of target readers he envisions for such a translation in Afrikaans. If a direct translation is understood as requiring extensive explanatory notes, the resultant translation becomes both cumbersome to use and costly to produce. He argues that such a translation may be impractical as a printed text, but that electronic media (Internet or CD Rom) may provide a practical means of making it available to its target readership. The use of electronic media could also help to reduce the both the costliness and the cumbersomeness of the final product.

Van der Merwe (1999) also addresses the problem of what a direct translation should look like. Relying on an inferential model of communication has two important implications for the form a translation should adopt. Firstly, traditional notions of formal equivalence limited equivalence between languages to lexical and grammatical levels. Modern advances in linguistics have shown that structural and conventional differences between languages extend beyond these two basic levels. Therefore, a direct translation should include higher levels of equivalence, such as "semantic, text-linguistic, pragmatic and socio-linguistic agreement". Secondly, the translation needs to provide readers with sufficient historical and sociocultural explanatory notes to enable them to interpret its contextually implied information correctly. In other words, the translators need to supply the information needed to enlarge the contextual environment of its readers, thereby enabling it to communicate successfully with them.

5. Proliferation of research and some unanswered questions

Although some remain sceptical of the value of relevance theory as a framework for translation (e.g., Kirk 2002), the past ten years have seen a proliferation of works lauding its value for translation.

Gutt himself has been the most prolific writer. He has written, amongst other things, "on the nature of implicit information in literary translation" (1996), "relevance: a key to quality assessment in translation" (1997), "pragmatic aspects in translation: some relevance-theoretic observations" (1998), "logical connectives, relationships and relevance" (1999), "textual properties,

communicative clues and the translator" (2000a), "translation as interlingual interpretive use" (2000b), "translation as a unique mode of communication" (2001), "translation, metarepresentation and claims of interpretive resemblance" (2004a), "relevance theory and translation: toward a new realism in Bible translation" (2004b), "on the impossibility of practicing translation without theory" (2005a), "on the significance of the cognitive core of translation" (2005b) and "approaches to translation: relevance theory" (2006).

Much research has been conducted on the translation of implicit, contextually dependant information (e.g., Unger 1996; Nicolle 1999; Unger 2000; Sequeiros 2002; Alves & Gonçalves 2003; Heltay 2003; Hill 2003). Dahlgren (1998; 2000) explored implications of relevance theory for the translation of poetic texts and Unger (2001) wrote about "genre and translation". The notion of interpretive resemblance as a yardstick for assessing the quality of a translation has been the object of articles by Galve (1995-96) and Sequeiros (2001).

In spite of this proliferation of writing about relevance theory and translation, I believe some key questions are still inadequately dealt with in the literature. Here are some examples:

- *Does relevance theory really provide a unified account of translation?* Despite Gutt's ardent attempts to answer this question with a definitive "yes", some questions remain about whether the analogy with direct quotation is sound.
- *What would (a) indirect translation and (b) direct translation look like when applied to the Bible?* Insufficient work has been done on expounding exactly how these approaches to translation would or should operate.
- *How should a relevance theoretic approach to translation handle the inclusive language debate?* Aside from pressure to be politically correct, are there sound theoretical reasons for embracing or rejecting the use of inclusive language such as translations like the NRSV and TNIV have done?

- *Does relevance theory help translators with the practical task of Bible translation? When all the philosophical issues are forgotten, will it help with the work of translating the Word of God, especially for language groups that do not yet have the Bible?*

I believe relevance theory provides a sound framework for Bible translation, but I also think there are some important questions needing practical answers. I shall attempt to engage some of them in forthcoming editions of *Conspectus*.

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