

Theoretical Maturation and Bible Translation:

A Critical Look at Translation Theory with Special Reference to Bible Translation.

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ABSTRACT

The present article provides a critical look at the history of Western translation theory, with a special emphasis on Bible translation, designed to trace the development of this specific corner of the discipline from its early stages towards maturity, as well as to explore some of its practical contributions to Bible translators. The author follows this growth, starting with the theoretical musings of translators like Jerome and Luther, which essentially argue for the validity of one specific type of translation in exclusion of others, through more developed, multi-lingual theories and processes, such as those of Nida, into present-day pragmatic theory, such as Gutt's, which presents a unified basis for understanding multiple types of translation depending on a variety of factors in the source text or the target audience. This theoretical development provides a much more open posture for understanding translation in broader terms, which in turn can help move translators beyond the tension between Dynamic and Formal Equivalence into a better understanding of all the different options available to them when undertaking a specific type of translation.

1. Introduction:

When I have talked to people outside the field about my interest in the world of translation theory, there have been several times that I have received a rather unexpected reaction: a strange face of surprise mixed with doubt. The unexpressed feeling seemed to ask how there could possibly be so much written about the simple, straight-forward process which many imagine translation to be. In fact, I would guess that many people are probably prone to classify translation theory in the same category as the popular opinion of philosophy: an incredible waste of time. Perhaps this is based on the rather naive opinion that translation is a fairly objective process, an innate ability of bilinguals, or worse yet, the output of an inexpensive computer program. Even worse still has been the experience of reading a popular book on Bible translation and coming away with the impression that the author does not even know that the world of translation theory exists. I read page after page dealing with classical problems in translation which show little or no understanding of how translators have grappled with these same problems in the past. It was as if this book was the first to deal with these problems in translation. And yet, the more one studies and practices translation, the more one should become aware of the complexity of this supposedly simple discipline and the sheer need to take advantage of the combined wisdom of previous generations. Translation is certainly not a simple objective process, such as using a calculator. If it were, translation theory would not be necessary; instead we could simply write an instruction manual. But the fact that translation is a complex process with multiple results warrants a theory. As with translation practice, the theoretical musings of translators over the centuries are not static. For the student of this discipline, there surfaces a clear development and progression over the centuries.

2. Background for the discussion:

But before delving into a more detailed look at the history of translation theory, we should consider the basic question of what exactly is meant by a theory of translation. *Theory*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “a systematic statement of rules or principles to be followed.” I have found it helpful to consider an independent field of theory to be able to compare and contrast it with translation. Music theory, for example is made up of certain objective elements such as the description of notes, key signatures, accidentals, and dynamics, to name a few. However, theory also extends to other, more subjective elements, especially those which deal with composition—the ways in which those more objective elements can or should be combined. Thus music theory dictates the way notes and intervals can be built into different types of chords and then governs the ways in which one chord *should* change to another.

Translation theory is in many ways similar. There are certainly elements of translation which may at least seem to be almost objective.¹ Words can be analyzed according to their grammatical function or their semantic components. The translator can then choose an appropriate term or phrase in the target language to render the original. Translation viewed in this narrow sense does indeed seem to be a fairly simple activity which even a machine could undertake, as long as it were capable of correctly determining the exact usage of the term in question. But translation also entails a much more subjective element.² The way a particular translator assembles the elements of his text can make an enormous difference in the communication.

Thus, a theory of translation seeks to delineate the principles which govern translation in such a way as to define a successful strategy for rendering a text in a different language. It is designed to steer a course which will avoid certain dangers and pitfalls as well as clarify the exact processes which happen in the mind of the translator. A theory serves not only to justify the practice of a translator but also to create uniformity across a group of translators or even throughout an extensive work by a single translator.

3. A Critical Survey of the Field

The present article seeks to present an overview of the history of Western translation theory, with a special emphasis on Bible translation, designed to point out some of the practical benefit of this field for the translator. There are several ways that this survey could have

1 I am aware that I am treading in very dangerous territory. While it is true that the field of semantics is very complex and in some ways subjective, I believe that there is still a rather objective side to the whole discussion. Words can solicit vastly different responses from listeners based on their context and many cultural features, but I would suggest that this meaning is limited. In other words, semantics is not completely subjective. The fact that communication exists suggests that there is something at least slightly objective about the whole process. A word may mean *many things*, but it cannot mean *anything*.

2 By this I do not mean to say that translation is completely subjective, for certainly if one were to give the same text to a group of experienced translators, the result, barring errors, would be many different translations, but they would most likely share very similar phrases and terminology. And yet no two translations would be completely alike. To return to the comparison involving music, a melodic line played for a group of composers could be harmonized in a number of different ways. The actual chord structures employed by the arrangers could vary, but the melodic line would still be recognizable in all. And yet, while many scores might contain similar sections, it is probable that no two would be exactly identical in every way. This is how creativity can play a part in both translation and music.

been carried out. An objective treatment of the different ideas proposed by different theorists in their particular historical context would certainly be of great benefit, but there are already a good number of these types of readers in circulation. In this article, however, I have undertaken a much more subjective treatment which is both critical and admittedly selective, focusing not only on general trends in translation but also on a specific issue. There are admittedly many aspects of translation theory that would be worthy of consideration. For example, it would be very informative to trace the growth and development of the concept of equivalence in translation,³ or even accuracy.⁴ But I propose to focus on the underlying understanding of translation as a larger discipline, its self-awareness, if you will. I am, of course, imposing certain divisions on the history of translation which, although they are by no means novel, must certainly be somewhat artificial, as are all periods in history, but which will prove to be extremely helpful in pointing out the developments of the field.

3.1 Translation Theory in Its Infancy

It is evident that translation existed long before the now famous texts which point to what we may formally call translation theory. We do, of course, have the history of how the Bible was first translated into Aramaic during the days of Nehemiah (8:8), but the specific process involved remains tacit. Some of the methodology of the translation of the LXX—assuming Philo's later account (in Robinson 1997:5) of the seventy-two translators working independently and producing identical translations to be a much embellished version of the actual events—appears in the *Letter of Aristeas* (in Robinson 1997:4). The committee appears to have worked together to “harmonize [the individual translations] by mutual comparison” (5). And there was certainly a concern for what they considered to be *accuracy*, but there are no specific thoughts recorded about how this accuracy was achieved or even judged. Bible translation would have to wait several more centuries for a translator to spell out a more specific theory.

3.1.1 Jerome and the *Vulgate*

The first true theorist in Bible translation was the extremely gifted monk named Eusebius Hieronymus, better known to the English speaking world as Jerome. Called upon by the Damasus in the fourth century to revise the rather chaotic state of the plethora of Latin translations of the New Testament, Jerome, unlike the practically anonymous translators of the LXX, clearly states his own ideas about translating in his personal correspondence. In a letter written to Pammachius in 395, Jerome defends himself against the accusations that he had mistranslated a letter from Pope Epiphanius to Bishop John of Jerusalem. Jerome cuttingly remarks, “They tell the unlearned that I have falsified the original, that I have not rendered word for word, that I have put ‘dear friend’ in place of ‘honourable sir’”(in Schaff 1892: 113). Jerome's reply, extensive and at times biting, but convincingly constructed, seeks to prove that his translation is not in error. Jerome openly states, “For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word” (in Schaff 1892: 113). Jerome's now famous reference to *sense-for-sense* instead of *word-for-word*⁵ is well thought out and argued for in the letter. In his defense he appeals to

3 See Gentzler (1993). *Contemporary Translation Theory*.

4 See Venuti (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*.

5 Jerome also speaks of this topic in another place: “A literal translation from one language into another obscures the sense; the exuberance of the growth lessens the yield. For while one's diction is enslaved to cases and metaphors, it has to explain by tedious circumlocutions what a few words would otherwise have sufficed to make plain. I have tried to avoid this error in the translation which at your request I have made of the story of the blessed Antony. My version always preserves the sense although it does not invariably keep

the translations of the Aramaic phrases that Jesus spoke which are found in the Gospels, the translation of the LXX, and especially to Cicero and Horace, two of the earliest theorists on translation.

In his work *De optimo genere oratorum*, 46 B.C., Cicero had complained about those who had so elevated the unadorned style of the Attic Greek orators that they believed that Latin orators, with their concern for style and eloquence, were unable to attain the same perfection. Cicero counters, “A grand, ornate, and copious style that is equally faultless is the mark of the Attic orators” (in Robinson 1997: 9), thus establishing the fundamental trait of the Romans as their perfection instead of plainness of speech. Cicero, in an attempt to prove his point, proceeds to translate the Attic orators Aeschines and Demosthenes. He states the following, however, about the way he carried out this task:

[I did so, not] as an interpreter[translator], but as an orator, keeping the same ideas and the forms, or as one might say, the 'figures' of thought, but in language which conforms to our usage. And in so doing, I did not hold it necessary to render word for word, but I preserved the general style and force of the language. For I did not think I ought to count them out to the reader like coins, but to pay them by weight, as it were. (in Robinson 1997: 9)

It is important to note that Cicero here argues against a literal, unnatural word-for-word translation, and yet, against this fact must be weighed the previous sentence in which he speaks of maintaining both the ideas and the *forms*. It is to this thought that he returns at the end of his introduction when he speaks of “retaining all their virtues, that is, the thoughts, the figures of thought and the order of topics, and following the language only so far as it does not depart from our idiom—if all words are not literal translations of the Greek, we have at least tried to keep them within the same class or type” (in Robinson 1997: 10). As Cicero's argument comes into focus, it is clear that he argues against a literal form of translation which would seem unnatural to his Latin readers. And yet, it is also important to note his remarks about “coining by analogy certain words such as would be new to our people, provided only they were appropriate” (in Robinson 1997: 7). These, as well as the previous remarks about form and word class, suggest that his translations were not always as “free” as some have assumed.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus, more commonly known as Horace, who lived from 65 to 8 B.C., is often quoted alongside of Cicero's argument for free translation. In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace proposes that “you may acquire private rights in common ground, provided you will neither linger in the one hackneyed and easy round; nor trouble to render word for word with the faithfulness of a translator; nor by your mode of imitating take the 'leap into the pit' out of which very shame, if not the law of your work, will forbid you to stir hand or foot to escape” (in Robinson 1997: 15). Horace's advice, apart from strengthening a prerogative for a freer form of translation, opens a window on the current ideas of translation that he struggled against.⁶ Obviously for Horace, the expectation for a *translator* was to give a faithful representation of each word of the original text. Horace, however, encourages the translator here to break free from such concerns into a much freer imitation.

It is important to remember that while Jerome appealed to the statements of Cicero and Horace, his actual statement about *sense-for-sense* translation was distinguished from his

the words of the original. Leave others to catch at syllables and letters, do you for your part look for the meaning.” (114)

6 There is some debate over the exact interpretation of Horace's comments about the “faithful translator.” Some understand him to be arguing for a more conservative, faithful translation, while others, including this author, read his words as a statement in favor of a freer translation.

work on the Scriptures. Jerome's *Vulgate* as it has come to be known, is neither a free, *sense-for-sense* rendering of the Sacred Text nor a coldly literal translation, as are many of the Old Latin manuscripts it replaced. It reigned virtually unchallenged as *the* Bible in Europe for the next thousand years, a masterful rendering of the Scriptures in Latin. Of course there were numerous efforts to translate the Bible into various vernacular languages throughout the Middle Ages, but there is little that is significant to the field of translation theory with reference to the Bible throughout this period.

3.1.2 Martin Luther

Martin Luther is the next great Bible translation theorist to appear on the scene. His translation of the Scriptures into German was influential not just spiritually but also linguistically. But significant in the present context is the fact that Luther also wrote about his process of translation. He, like Jerome before him, possessed a fiery personality which did not take the criticism of his enemies lightly. In his *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, an open letter dated 1530, Luther responds to some of the attacks on his translation, which, like Jerome's letter a millennium before, helps shed light on Luther's ideas about translation. Luther begins by justifying his translation of *iustificari ex fide* from Romans 3:28 as “allein durch den glauben” (only by faith). He freely admits that the word “allein” or “only” in English does not occur in Paul, but he justifies his addition on the grounds of the clarity of the translation as well as the meaning. He states, “If you want to translate it into strong and clear German, you've got to put it in there. You see, I want to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since German was the language I was translating into. And see, that's the way we do it in German” (in Robinson 1997: 86). He goes on to give other examples where a literal translation would be inappropriate or misleading, including finally his translation of the angelic greeting to Mary, which, because of the rather literal translation in the *Vulgate*, or even in the opinion of some, a mistranslation (Nida 1964: 28), had taken on special doctrinal importance throughout the Middle Ages. Here he substitutes “du holdselige” [thou pleasing one] in place of the *Vulgate's gratia plena* [full of grace] (Luke 1:28). This translation, continues Luther, “[gives] Germans a chance to think about what the angel's greeting meant” (in Robinson 1997: 87). He even goes so far as to show that his translation was rather conservative, compared to what he considered to be the best German: “Gott grüsse dich, du liebe Maria' [God greet you, dear Mary], for that is all the angel meant to say, and what he would have said if he had greeted her in German (Luther 1530: n.p.).

Luther's linguistic standard was not ecclesiastical language, heavily influenced by Latin, but the language that “the mother in her house and the common man would [speak] [...] 'straight from the heart'. This is the kind of ordinary phrasing that I've always striven for, but alas, haven't always managed to find. The letters of the Latin alphabet make it pretty hard to speak good German” (in Robinson 1997: 87). In fact, later in the text he speaks of ignoring the actual wording of the original in order to discover a good German equivalent (88). But it must of course be added that Luther follows these remarks with one important clarification: “On the other hand I have not just gone ahead and disregarded altogether the exact wording in the original. Rather, with my helpers I have been very careful to see that where everything depends upon a single passage, I have kept to the original quite literally and have not departed lightly from it” (Luther 1530: n.p.). Luther's idea about translation, as is clear from these statements, seems to be admittedly freer than the more conservative literalness found in the *Vulgate*. He obviously faced pressure to conform his translation to a literal type of translation which was common in his day. But he pushes towards a greater degree of freedom which he argues will communicate the message of the text more clearly.

3.1.3 Throughout the 17th to the 19th Centuries

Luther's push for more freedom in translation is repeated over and again throughout the following centuries. But eventually the pendulum would swing back to an argument for a more literal type of translation in the 19th century, led by the theologian Schliermacher. But in order to understand Schliermacher's position, it is important to follow the course of translation theory leading up to his century.

In the wake of the Renaissance, the study of modern languages began to grow and with it, new understandings of translation. As grammarians shifted their focus from the study of Latin and Greek to the modern languages, there was a growing acceptance of freer translational practices (Hermans 1992: 105). One famous example is the French humanist Etienne Dolet (1509-46). This translator and printer who translated, among other works, the NT and the Psalms, was eventually executed as a heretic for what was purportedly a heretical mistranslation of Plato. In his 1540 manuscript "La maniere de bien traduire d'une langue en autre" Dolet states the following:

One must not give in to translating word for word. Those who do suffer from a poor and absent mind. [...] Therefore, it is too much devotion (I would say stupidity or ignorance) to begin the translation at the beginning of the clause. However, if you express the meaning of the author you are translating by reordering the words, no one can fault you for it. [...] One should recognize that those who endeavor to translate line by line or verse by verse are fools. This error often leads them to deprave the meaning of the author they are translating, failing as they do to express the grace or completeness of either language. (in Robinson 1997: 96)

Dolet's ideas, while obviously not readily accepted by all in his day, signal a new direction that translation was slowly beginning to take. One of the most influential figures on translation in England is perhaps John Dryden (1631-1700). Although he was not the first to recognize that there are different types of translations which are possible, his classification has become famous.

All translations, I suppose, may be reduced to these three heads. First, that of metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another. [...] The second way is that of paraphrase, or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense [...]. The third way is that of imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion. (in Robinson 1997: 172)

Dryden argues that the first form of translation is difficult if not impossible. "Tis much like dancing on ropes with fettered legs: a man may shun a fall by using caution; but the gracefulness of motion is not to be expected: and when we have said the best of it, 'tis but a foolish task; for no sober man would put himself into a danger for the applause of escaping without breaking his neck. [...] Imitation and verbal [literal] version are, in my opinion, the two extremes which ought to be voided" (in Robinson 1997: 172-173). And yet, Dryden's attitudes toward translation cannot merely be relegated to the freedom that Dolet encouraged or that Abraham Cowley, 1618-1667, Dryden's contemporary, practiced. It is important to remember the sense of subjection to the original which translators labored under. In his essay, "Steering Betwixt Two Extremes," (1697) Dryden admits the following:

[...] There is one [difficulty] remaining, which is insuperable to all translators. We are bound to our author's sense [...]. But slaves we are, and labour on another man's plantation; we dress the vineyard, but the wine is the owner's: [...] we are forced to untune our own verses, that we

may give his meaning to the reader. He who invents is master of his thoughts and words: he can turn and vary them as he pleases, till he renders them harmonious; but the wretched translator has no such privilege: for, being tied to the thoughts, he must make what music he can in the expression; and for this reason, it cannot always be so sweet as that of the original. (in Robinson 1997: 175).

Alexander Fraser Tytler, 1747-1813, like Dryden nearly half a century before him, once again attempted to whittle the field of translation down to its two polar opposites and their golden mean. In his essay “The Proper Task of a Translator,” (1790) he defines two opinions which have historically been adopted by translators: the first render the sense of the original through whatever structures the translator deems best, while the second goes beyond the sense to include even the style and order. Then he concludes the following:

As these two opinions form opposite extremes, it is not improbable that the point of perfection should be found between the two. I would therefore describe a good translation to be, *That in which the merit of the original work is so completely transfused into another language as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country which that language belongs as it is by those who speak the language of the original work.* [italics in original] (in Robinson 1997: 209)

Based on this ideal, Tytler suggests a series of laws: “That the translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work. That the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original. That the translation should have all the ease of original composition” (209). Thus Tytler argues once again for a freer form of translation than was common in centuries previous.

The relative freedom argued for up into the eighteenth century caused the pendulum to a swing back toward a more literal type of translation in the following century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a new attitude toward translation, which was especially well articulated by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Like Dryden and Tytler before him, Schleiermacher once again attempts to account for the wide variations between translations and then argue for that which he sees as most beneficial. And yet, his outline is fresh in that he postulates translation not on the grounds of faithful and free, as those before him, but rather the orientation of the translation. While it is true that he goes on to define both paraphrase and imitation, Schleiermacher proceeds to exclude both in the essay, focusing solely on these two types of translation: “I believe there are only two [ways of translating]. The translator either (1) disturbs the writer as little as possible and moves the reader in his direction, or (2) disturbs the reader as little as possible and moves the writer in his direction” (in Robinson 1997: 229). According to Schleiermacher, the former produces a rather foreign sounding text which is extremely beneficial, although difficult for its target audience, while the latter results in a very natural text, easily read and understood by the target reader. When the translator attempts to bring the reader to the original, he is involved in “the admittedly arduous task of supplying the reader with an awareness of this foreign world as economically as possible, while at the same time letting the greater ease and naturalness of the original shine through everywhere” (in Robinson 1997: 237). Throughout his essay, Schleiermacher argues that the naturalizing translation, while always more popular, does little to really benefit those who read it, for it conceals that which is foreign and thus causes the reader to miss out on what he views as one of the greatest benefits of translation: the introduction of that which is different and new. A translation which does not “naturalize” is especially helpful for provoking fresh ideas in a society.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, 1767-1835, a contemporary of Schleiermacher, pushed even further than others before him in his ideas about language and meaning. Although he is famous for several reasons, what has most radically affected translation is his idea about meaning. “All linguistic forms are symbols: not the things themselves, nor conventional signs, but sounds that, through the spirit from which they emanate and continue to emanate, find themselves in an actual and if you like mystical relation with the things and concepts they represent” (in Robinson 1997: 239). Up to this point, language had generally been viewed in terms of signs or symbols which stood in place of the reality which they referred to. Translational equivalents were taken for granted: the word that one language used to refer to an object or concept must of necessity be equal to the word another language uses to refer to the same object or concept. Humboldt, however, argued that every language is unique in its conceptualization:

How could one word whose meaning is not directly grounded in sense perception be absolutely identical with a word in another language? There must be differences; and in fact if one closely compares the best, most painstakingly faithful translations, one is astonished at the divergences that appear where the translator sought only sameness and similitude. One could even argue that the more a translation labours to be faithful, the more divergent it becomes. (in Robinson 1997: 239)

It was with these ideas that the topic of translatability came to fruition, for it was only logical to ask if realistically there was any possibility for translation within the linguistic framework which Humboldt described. And yet, Humboldt himself continues in his Romantic essay to argue in favor of translation: “The wonderful thing about languages is [...] each can be infinitely complicated, enhanced, and ennobled by the spirit of the nation that works on it. It would not be too much to say that every language [...] is capable of expressing everything, from the sublime to the base” (in Robinson 1997: 239). Thus Humboldt is the voice which brought to the forefront the fact that translation, while valuable in its own right, is not what previous generations had assumed it to be: a simple matter of exact or nearly exact equivalence. As Roman Jakobson states in his essay, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” 1959, “Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey. [...] In its cognitive function, language is minimally dependent on the grammatical pattern [...]—the cognitive level of language not only admits but directly requires recoding interpretation, i.e. translation” (in Rainer 1992: 149). Jakobson argues, for example, that when one translates an English plural into a language like Russian, which makes a distinction between dual and plural, he must interpret and specify the text to a greater degree than perhaps even the original author had intended. Translation theory was ripe for a change. A new understanding of language and linguistics had all but killed the idea of true, literal correspondence between two languages. It would not be long until the pendulum would swing away from the more literal tradition of Bible translation to a much freer model.

3.1.4 Bible Versions

There are two great English Bibles which illustrate nicely the tenor of translation during this period. The first is the great *Authorized Version* of 1611. Its majesty and beauty have made it an enduring treasure of English literature. It seems to fall in line with the same type of translation found in the LXX and the *Vulgate* before it: while it is not excessively free in its renderings, it does not cross over into wholly unnatural or forced translations. The push for a more literal style of translation in the 19th century, however, is perhaps best seen in the more

literal revision of the AV1611 called *The Revised Version* or *The American Standard Version*. This work is significantly more literal throughout.⁷

3.1.4 Recapitulation and Analysis

In this initial stage of translation theory, the actual practice of translation seems to swing in different directions. At times the debate centers on how to achieve a balance between free and literal translation. Other times it takes a more conservative move toward a clear defense of literal translation. Some struggle to classify distinct types of translation, while others start to make new inroads into a better understanding of linguistics. But despite the seeming variety in practice, there is a certain unity to the theory throughout this period: the texts tend to be defenses of translations written as letters or in introductions. But in thinking of the larger discipline of translation, a broader understanding of the field beyond the present situation of the translator seems to be just in its initial stages. Many of the arguments are very well stated, and their translations are certainly worthy of merit, but there seems to be an identity in their thought which suggests a certain degree of theoretical unity among all. While some certainly do recognize that there are different ways to translate, each views one manner of translation as being clearly superior to the others. In a word, these texts tend to be highly prescriptive about *the* way to translate, as if there were only one ahistorical and decontextualized way of translating. Other types of translation are disregarded—in some cases even *a priori*—as being less than optimal.

3.2 Translation Theory in Its Adolescence

This first period of translation theory which I have sketched out is admittedly very long. But what seems to signal the beginning of a new period is a new development in the related field of linguistics. Led by figures such as Saussure, Skinner and Chomsky, a new vision of languages emerged, and with it came a new emphasis in understanding translation.

3.2.1 Early 20th Century

Eugene A. Nida, 1914-present, has been almost undoubtedly the most influential figure in modern Bible translation. After finishing his undergraduate degree in Greek, he pursued an interest in Bible translation through the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Dallas). There he was introduced to the field of linguistics, which in turn led him to pursue a Masters and then a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Michigan. Soon after finishing his degree, he joined the American Bible Society to investigate “why so many of their publications of the Scriptures were so seldom read and so frequently misunderstood” (Nida 2003: 135). For the next forty years, he served as the Secretary for Translations, a position which took him to every part of the globe and gave him first hand experience with the problems faced by Bible translators in the broadest of contexts. It was from these experiences that Nida drew as he began to write concerning translation.

Although Nida had published a number of books and articles throughout the forties and fifties, including his early book, *Bible Translation*, 1946 and revised in 1961, one of his most influential books on translation is *Toward a Science of Translating*, 1964. He begins the book by showing that the basic conflict between the classic extremes in translation, “(1) literal vs. free translating, and (2) emphasis on form vs. concentration on content [...] are not well

7 In my doctoral dissertation, I conducted a comparative analysis of ten English translations to determine the amount of formal shift present in each one, as well as to point out different tendencies which distinguish modern English translations from more traditional translations. See Bell, David B. (2005). *A Comparative Analysis of English Bible Translations with a View Towards Defining and Describing Paradigms.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alicante. http://www.geocities.com/david_b_bell/

defined. For the most part such expressions as literal vs. free, translation vs. paraphrase, and words vs. sense are essentially battle cries for those who wish to defend their own work or criticize the work of others” (Nida 1964: 22). His summary of Bible translation results in the creation of a new term which has been extremely popular in the literature ever since it was coined. Nida referred to the previous practice, common in Bible Translation, as Formal Equivalence, a source-oriented translation which aims to represent even the formal elements of the text. On the other end of Nida's spectrum is what he calls here Dynamic Equivalence, “directed not so much toward the source message, as toward the receptor response” (Nida 1964: 166). In some ways, Nida is not new in his theory (and neither does he claim to be). The idea of receptor response had appeared earlier among theorists such as Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt, 1606-1664 (in Lefevere 1992: 36), but Nida's presentation pulls many elements together into a unified, teachable approach, which among other important factors, has helped establish his methodology as an important milestone in translation theory. The foundation of translation for Nida rests upon finding the “closest natural equivalent:” the word or phrase in the receptor language which will produce the same response for the modern reader that the original produced in its primary audience. Herein, perhaps, lies the greatest novelty of Nida's theory: up until this point in the history of translation, faithfulness was typically defined on the basis of either word-for-word or sense-for sense correspondence. The former was, as many had noted, at times rather deceptive, while the latter was difficult to measure objectively. Nida, however, is able to redefine faithfulness in translation without making reference to the need to follow the exact form of the original.⁸ By couching the argument in terms of behavior or more specifically, reader response, Nida, initially at least, avoids the slippery slope of sense-for-sense translation.

Five years after the publication of *Toward a Science of Translating*, Nida published another influential theoretical work on Bible Translation together with Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 1969. This second book “presents certain of these same theories [presented in *Toward a Science*] in a pedagogically oriented order, designed to assist the translator to master the theoretical elements as well as to gain certain practical skills in learning how to carry out the procedures” (Nida 1969: vii). One of the important differences between the first and second book is the emphasis placed upon organizing the material in such a way as to facilitate the training of translators, including exercises and activities to be used in a classroom setting.

Both of these books teach the same “scientific” approach to translation. While formal equivalence viewed the process of translation as the direct substitution of equivalents, Nida postulates a three step process (Nida 1969: 3). The source text must first be analyzed to determine meaning. This analysis, however, is complicated by the complex relationships of meaning to grammar as well as specific problems like ambiguity. Therefore Nida proposes an analysis based on the four semantic categories of object, event, abstract, and relation (Nida 1969: 37). All words in a language can be classified under one of these four categories, and these four semantic categories enjoy some sort of intuitive relationship with particular grammatical classes of terms. Generally, objects relate to nouns, events to verbs, abstracts to adjectives and adverbs, and relations to prepositions and conjunctions. The problem arises, however, when these semantic categories are shifted or skewed (Nida 1969: 38, Larson 1984:

8 “The older focus in translating was the form of the message, and translators took particular delight in being able to reproduce stylistic specialties, e.g. Rhythms, plays on words, chiasmus, parallelism, and unusual grammatical structures. The new focus, however, has shifted from the form of the message to the response for the receptor” (Nida, 1969, 1). Accuracy can only be rightly determined by judging the extent to which the response of the receptor is substantially equivalent to the response of the original receptors” (28).

30). Skewing occurs, for example, when a noun, which in the most direct case is a thing, refers instead to an event. The translator should therefore rework the text to eliminate skewing in the analytical stage. Thus, he should seek to convert all object words into nouns, all event words into verbs, and all abstract words into adjectives or adverbs. This careful analysis makes it possible for the translator to then reformulate the meaning of the text in simple, clear, and unambiguous kernel sentences.⁹

These kernel sentences are then transferred to the target language in the second step. Here Nida deals with various problems that translators face when they move from one language to another such as idiomatic expressions, but by far the most interesting treatment is the subject of implicit and explicit meaning in the text. Nida demonstrates that frequently the implicit meaning of a word or phrase in one language does not correspond to what is implicitly understood in a similar term or construction in another language. Therefore, the translator may frequently find it necessary to make explicit what was only implicit in the original or may even leave what was explicit in the original as merely implicit in the translation (Nida 1969: 111). Finally, in the third step, the translator can determine the most natural way to communicate the transferred kernel in the target language.

The result of Nida's "science" is in essence the same type of translation which Cicero, Jerome, Dolet, Luther, *et al.* had argued for, but under an entirely different framework. Instead of presenting it as a translation which is free from slavery to the words and structures of the original, he shows it to be a translation which is faithful to the *results* of the original. It is interesting to note that in the two major works which purportedly build on Nida's theoretical foundation, the function, or reader response is absent. In both Beekman and Callow's *Translating the Word of God*, 1974, 1988, and Mildred L. Larson's *Meaning-based Translation: A Guide to Cross-language Equivalence*, 1984, the emphasis falls simply upon meaning over form. Beekman and Callow define fidelity by means of two questions: "(1) Does the translation communicate the same meaning as the original? (2) Does it communicate it as clearly and as idiomatically as the original did?" (1988: 34). Larson, in a similar way, argues that the translator must find the appropriate form in the target language to idiomatically communicate the meaning of the original. Both of these approaches, while slightly different from Nida's, generally yield the same result and are usually considered methodologies for dynamic equivalence.

Nida's influence on the field has certainly been great, as all freely admit. And yet, the field continues to develop. Interestingly enough, on the practical side, it is hard to find reference to any theory other than dynamic equivalence in the introduction to a modern English Bible. And yet, on the technical side in articles and books, there is obviously a push to refine dynamic or functional equivalence or even move beyond it.

One voice calling for a revision of functional equivalence is that of Ernst Wendland. In his chapter "A Literary Approach to Bible Translation" (2003), he argues that traditionally formal equivalence has been more concerned with what it called the deep structure of the text or its meaning, and has tended to ignore some of the higher level factors involved in the or-

9 One of the major attacks on Nida's theory is that he misappropriates the Generative concept of deep structure or kernel sentences for his own theory (Gentzler 1993: 44). Although Nida did initially make reference to Chomsky and "transformational grammar" (Nida 1969: 39), he has since made it clear that there is a fundamental difference between his use of terms and those of Chomsky: "I was personally pleased to use the term 'kernel' because it fit well the kinds of distinction I was already making between basic combinations of entities, activities, processes, states, characteristics and relationals" (Nida 2003: 141).

ganization of the text (Wendland 2003: 200). Instead of focusing rather exclusively on the function of the original, he moves beyond to consider content and form as well (208). Wendland recognizes that at times the focus on meaning in translation has robbed the text of certain recurring literary markers and even deeper meaning, since at times interpretation “is not a matter of either/or, but both/and” (218). He concludes by calling his approach literary functional equivalence (LiFE), a “development (and corrective) of, rather than a radical break from, earlier statements on Bible translation developed primarily through the influence of Nida” (228). The inclusion of the term *literary* to the already established functional equivalence “enables one to distinguish this significant shift in perspective from earlier descriptions of functional equivalence, in which the literary character of the biblical texts has not been fully considered and focus has been on lower levels of text” (227). Finally in a summary of his approach, he delineates the five principle traits:

- A discourse-centered, genre-based perspective, [...]
- A prominent pragmatic-functional component, [...]
- A concern for how the overall *situational frames of reference* [...] would have influenced early interpretations of the original document and how the contemporary contextual setting of the translated passage will influence the intended audience's interpretation;
- A focus upon the interrelated *artistic* and *rhetorical* dimensions of discourse, [... and]
- A special interest also in the *oral/aural* dimension of the biblical message. [italics in original] (Wendland 2003: 228-29)

This approach represents an interesting development in Bible translation. The traditional approach to translation worked on the level of words and perhaps phrases. Nida's work with kernel sentences and back transformation extended the unit of translation to the sentence. Now, this pragmatic approach widens the focus even more to try to represent even the broadest unit, the entire text itself.

3.2.2 Bible Translations

Nida's theoretical models have inspired a landslide in new translations of the Bible in English alone, not to mention in hundreds of other languages worldwide. Starting in the late sixties, multiple translations begin to appear under the label of dynamic or functional equivalence. Unlike the traditional model of translation, functional equivalence truly opened the door for multiple translations. If one starts with the traditional model of translation, seeking to represent the original text as carefully and as accurately as the normal usage of the target language will allow him, he will be somewhat limited in the number of truly different translations he can produce. New translations could revise vocabulary or even “fix” certain mistranslations, but there comes a point when the changes become minimal. Functional equivalence, however, with its hermeneutic step of back transformations and reconstructions, opens up the field for multiple, significantly different translations. Also, perhaps the simple fact that Nida himself was not directly behind any one translation has stimulated the field as well to continue producing translations.

The first major modern translation in English which is usually associated with this methodology is the *New English Bible* (NEB). This British translation was first published as a NT in 1961 and then as a complete Bible in 1970. As David Daniell states in his book *The Bible in English*, (2003) “It is absolutely not KJV, nor RV, nor RSV. It is a fresh English voice, and good for the Greek” (748). In many ways the NEB represented many of the scholarly advances of modern textual criticism, and even boasted the name of the famous liberal theologian C. H. Dodd as its general editor. Meanwhile, back in the United States, the Bible Society was working on another new translation to follow Eugene Nida's theoretical frame-

work. In 1966, the American Bible Society published Robert G. Bratcher's *Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's English Version* (TEV). This new translation, which in 1976 appeared with the OT as well, was inspired in part by a new translation in simplified Spanish for use among tribal groups in South America (Nida 2003: 69-70). According to the Preface, it sought "to follow the original texts [...] in a standard, everyday, natural English, [...] at the [American] elementary school reading level" (Bratcher in Daniell 2003: 758). This common language Bible, which avoids technical, ecclesiastical vocabulary, has become for many synonymous with dynamic equivalence.

Two other important translations appeared in the seventies. The first was *The Living Bible* (NT 1967; OT 1971). Kenneth Taylor, who was working for Moody Publishers during this period, felt the need to make the Scriptures more intelligible, especially for small children. Taylor, however, unlike J. B. Phillips who had worked from the original Greek, did his paraphrase from *The American Standard Version* of 1901. The results, surprisingly have been extremely popular, perhaps in part due to an endorsement by the extremely influential evangelist Billy Graham. A few years after *The Living Bible*, *The New International Version* appeared (NT 1973; OT 1978). Under the banner of dynamic equivalence, it sought to produce a much more conservative translation than TEV. Other new translations within this tendency include several revisions of the above mentioned versions, specifically those major revisions such as *The New Revised Standard Version* (1990) and *The New Living Translation* (1996). There have also been other new efforts, such as *The New Century Version* (1987), *The Contemporary English Version* (1995), Eugene Peterson's paraphrase *The Message* (NT 1993; OT 2002), and the Lutheran translation *God's Word to the Nations* (NT 1992; OT 1995). As is common with any strong movement, there has also been a counter reaction to dynamic equivalence. Adapting Nida's terminology, several versions have appeared in recent years claiming to be formal equivalent translations, even arguing for the benefits of this methodology over dynamic equivalence. Perhaps one of the most popular has been *The New American Standard Bible* (NT 1963; OT 1970). Unlike earlier revisions of KJV, this attempt was presented as an effort to retranslate while retaining a preference for the phraseology of the traditional English translations. The result is a very literal version in the spirit of ASV, but which avoids the archaic and frequently awkward wording that made that version so difficult to read. This period has also been marked by several efforts to revise KJV more directly, the most famous of which is *The New King James* (NT 1979; OT 1982). The major difference between this revision and all of the previous revisions mentioned is that here the original language texts behind the translation have not been modified. Instead of dealing with textual matters, the revision is limited to merely stylistic concerns. Other important new translations in this tendency include *The English Standard Version* (2001), a new revision of the RSV, the collaborative Internet-based *New English Translation* (NET) Bible (2001), and *The Holman Christian Standard Bible* (2004).

3.2.3 Recapitulation and Analysis

Nida was not particularly novel in his concept of a middle ground approach between literal and free translation. That had been discussed for centuries. I propose that his true innovation was the criterion for judging this middle ground and his methodology for achieving it. Whereas traditionally the middle ground was determined by sticking as close to the original as possible while still remaining natural, Nida postulated a move which defined equivalence in terms of reader response rather than linguistic or semantic identity across languages. This allows for significant restructuring of the text, resulting in a greater freedom from the structures of the original. Thanks to Nida's broad experience in translation around the world, his

theory shows definite signs of maturation over the ideas expressed throughout the first period. Nida's experience in the field and his ubiquitous examples throughout his works strengthen his principles. But even here, theory still does not give a wider view of the discipline. While he certainly managed to bring about a significant change in way Bible Translation was carried out—treating the text in a more practical manner rather than as a literary text—Nida and most who follow his methodology continue to argue that Functional/Dynamic Equivalence is the best way to translate. Translation theory had still not obtained a more complete consciousness of itself as a much larger and varied discipline.

3.3 Translation Theory Grows Towards Maturity

In my opinion, the biggest shift in Translation Theory which justifies a separate division for post Nida Bible translation theory is the change in theory from prescriptive to descriptive. With the onset of pragmatics, for the first time theorist stopped telling us *why* they translate as they do or even how one *should* translate, and they started to look at how people actually do translate. This allowed them to get a larger image of translation, a better understanding of what translation really is, which in turn allows them to come back to the question of how translation *should* be done with much better insights into the problems that have tied translation theory in knots during the first twenty centuries of the discipline. This new descriptive perspective allows theorists to postulate about the underlying unity in “free” and “literal” translations without an *a priori* focus on only one type of translation as valid.¹⁰

3.3.1 Current trends

There are several lines of investigation which we could look at under the current pragmatic model in translation theory. And many of my comments would be applicable to theories such as Skopos, but I will focus on the specific efforts in the field of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson: 1986).

The principal figure in the application of Relevance Theory to translation is Ernst-August Gutt, whose book *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (1991), attacks the current paradigm which offers equivalence as the principal way to evaluate translation. Based on the various difficulties in objectively evaluating equivalence, he suggests that the idea of relevance proves to be a better theoretical basis for translation. His approach to translation works under the assumption that translation is communication rather than simply behavior (Gutt 1991: 21). But the true challenge that Gutt faces is the attempt to deal with translation in a more general, overall sense, rather than merely describing a narrow type of translation, such as literary or poetic translation, while ignoring technical translation, for example, the point at which previous theories have failed (99). For Gutt, translation must be considered as interlingual interpretive use based on “what the translator believe[s] to be relevant to his contemporary [sic] audience” (117). Perhaps the simplest summary of this theory lies in an analogy between quotation, or intralingual interpretive use, and translation, interlingual interpretive use. A speaker who wishes to make reference to something another speaker has said will choose to do so either by direct or indirect quotation, depending on which he deems to be more relevant in a particular situation. “Indirect quotations depend on resemblance in cognitive effects, [while] direct quotations depend on resemblance in linguistic properties” (126).

¹⁰ Nida feels no need to support his statement, “The best translation does not sound like a translation” (1969, 12). Other works in the field begin with the very same *a priori* assumption (Beekman, 1974, 32). Vermeer is fresh in stating, “The important point is that a given source text does not have one correct or best translation only (1979: 182).

And so, by means of analogy, he establishes two basic types of translation: direct and indirect.¹¹

The difference between these two categories, however, does not merely lie in the treatment of form and/or meaning, as most previous theories suggest. Rather, “the crucial point is that direct translation presumes to [communicate the originally intended interpretation] in the context envisaged by the original communicator and not in any context the receptor audience may happen to bring to the translation” (165). Semantic and stylistic elements often cannot be retained directly in translation because of the asymmetrical relationship between languages, and yet, a translator may seek to use structures that will communicate similar clues (127). For example, it would be valid to translate the Amharic greeting “*t'ena yist'illiñ*, literally 'May he give (you) health on my behalf!' by an English expression like *hello*. Though this expression does have a semantic representation, involving concepts like giving and health, no thought of these seems to cross people's [sic] minds when they exchange this greeting” (149). Gutt stresses that it is important to note that direct translation does not necessarily succeed in perfectly communicating the original interpretation, but rather that it presumes to do so: “it creates the presumption of complete interpretive resemblance. [... Direct translation] gives the receptors important information about the informative intention of the communicator. It entitles them to consider all the explicatures and implicatures which they can recover with respect to the original context as having been part of the intended interpretation of the original” (186). Indirect translation, in contrast, does not have the same “demand for the translation to be interpreted with regard to the original context” (165). Rather it carries “the presumption of complete interpretive resemblance” “in any context the receptor audience may happen to bring to the translation” (165). Gutt's work in translation theory presents an extremely plausible and profound analysis of translation which promises very interesting developments for the future.

3.3.2 Recapitulation and Analysis

We have yet to see the real influence of this development in theory in new Bible translations. It may be that the true influences will not be readily noticeable, for this theoretical position does not necessarily generate a clearly distinguishable type of translation. Perhaps it is more of an understanding which helps the translator view his task with greater clarity. In my opinion, however, this is truly a valuable contribution to the field. Throughout this article I have chosen the metaphor of maturity, but not to suggest that theory has arrived and will not develop any further. Rather it seems in my opinion, at least with regard to the specific criterion of self-awareness, that translation has arrived at a more realistic, broader understanding of what translation actually is and thus stands in good position to continue to develop in a healthy direction. With the arrival of the pragmatic paradigm, theory has shifted from prescriptive to descriptive, thus clearly delineating different legitimate types of translation. Translation theory has the opportunity to move beyond the heated discussion about how one *should* translate to the question of what influences the translator's choice to favor one type of translation over another. Gutt shows us that direct or indirect translation may be relevant to us or our audience. *Skopos* suggests that there are purposes which could warrant different types of translation. Theory is no longer preaching that good translations do not sound like translations or that attention to detail in the text will lead to accuracy. It seems to suggest that the

¹¹ Gutt defends his limitation of types of translation to two, instead of three or more as others over the course of translation history have argued in the following way: “The answer is that this is natural on the assumption that interpretive resemblance is a graded notion that has complete resemblance as its limiting case: indirect translation covers most of the continuum, and direct translation picks out the limiting case” (Gutt 1991: 164).

best type of translation will be determined by several factors such as the specific needs of his audience.

4 Conclusion

A familiarity with the field of theory can save us the effort of rehashing or getting stuck in the same arguments which have occupied translators during centuries. If we have learned anything from translation theory we must recognize that the question of which is better, “literal” or “free” translation (or whatever other term you want to use) does not have a definitive answer. We can move beyond to a recognition that both can be legitimate translation strategies, which in turn allows us to discuss which would be best for the specific translation that we are involved in. A Bible targeted for a non-Christian culture may clearly require a rather interpretive, “free” translation whereas a translation designed to appear with study notes might do well to aim for a more “traditional” type of translation. Each translation might be very successful and in fact well done.

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