WHICH IS WRONG, THE ENGLISH OR THE FRENCH?

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Category: Translation

Anyone who follows the subject of Bible Translation on web searches or Twitter cannot help but notice the amount of heat (and a little light) which is generated on the subject of literal or word for word translations. One book, which was published recently and which is getting a lot of favourable reviews says: â€œtranslators must decide what English *word or phrase* most closely corresponds to a given *word* of the original textâ€ (read a good review here). In other words, translation is all about rendering the words of the original text into words or phrases in the new language. Even John Piper got in on this question arguing that he wants a Bible that has all of the words. On the surface, this sort of thing sounds very persuasive and it is used as an argument to suggest that some Bible translations are not as good as others.

The problem is that translation is not simply about finding ways to move words from one language to another. I recently gave a simple illustration to a friend on Facebook to illustrate this.

- In English we say *"I sit down".*
- In Fench: *"Je m'assois".*

Both of these mean essentially the same thing. However, in a literal translation, the French means 'I myself sit'. The French doesn't have the word 'down' at all, and equally the English doesn't have 'myself'. You simply cannot translate one phrase into the other by translating the words. In just this simple phrase translation involves adding one word and removing another, whether you go from English to French of vice-versa. So if translation is about getting the words right, which is correct, the English or French?

Joel Hoffman has a similar exercise derived from a headline in Le Monde.