ALL ABOUT RUNNING (NO, NOT THAT SORT...)

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Category: Methodology

I was running. I was running a bath. I was running for office. I was running a company. Not to mention my nose is running or the exhortation to "set your motor running and head out on the highway".

In English, we use the wordÂ *run* in its various forms in many different ways. It's not something we think about a great deal, it's just part of the way we speak.Â If we were asked, we'd probably identify the key meaning of the word as being "a bit like walking, only quicker" and with a bit of imagination, we can see how the other uses might be related to this central sense.

However, there is almost certainly, no other language on earth that uses equivalent for the word "run" in this multitude of ways. I listed six uses of the word run in the first paragraph and, in all probability, you would need to use six different words or phrases to translate them into any other language.

It works in the other direction too. Depending on the context, you may need to use a number of different English words to translate one word from another language.

Words have multiple senses and those senses don't overlap from one language to another.

What this means is that the idea that you can consistently translate a word in one language, say New Testament Greek, by the same word in another language, say English, is tripe. A good translator will choose the best word or phrase to capture the meaning of the original in a particular context. In different contexts, the translation may change. This isn't a conspiracy, it's just a simple function of the way in which languages, all languages, work.

There is no clear, simple one-to-one agreement between words in different languages. This means that translators will sometimes make different choices as to which sense they think is the best. This isn't just a case of sticking a pin in a dictionary and hoping for the best, it involves detailed study of the original language, looking at the word in different contexts and thoughtfully coming to a conclusion. Sometimes, translations choose different words - though given the amount of variation that is possible, English language translations are actually pretty consistent.

What you cannot do in translation is to look at all of the possible different meanings of a word and choose the one you like. People with Greek dictionaries or Amplified Bibles, but no background in language study are apt to do this.Â A word such as "run" may have many possible translations, but in a given context only one or two will be possible. To choose a particular meaning because you like it can be as incongruous as saying that an Olympic Athlete has a snotty nose, when he was actually taking part in the marathon. Run, can mean snotty nose, but probably not in this context.

Likewise, when a Bible translation (especially one of the more fanciful ones) translates a passage or phrase in a way that is completely different to the majority of translations, we need to be careful. There is a good reason why all of the other translations have chosen the tack they have. The novel translation may seem to be "bringing out the meaning of the original", but it is more likely to be clouding the meaning or adding something that wasn't there in the first place.