THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A LITERAL TRANSLATION

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Let's stop using the word "literally" when we talk about Bible translation; it literally makes my blood boil!
Category: Observations

A few days ago, I came across a blog post which was making a valid point about the differences in meaning of two Greek words which are usually translated "go" in English. The post made an interesting point, but I did have one significant problemÂ which rather distracted from what would, otherwise, have been a good read.

> ***â€œGo thereforeâ€*** *from Matthew 28:19. â€œÏ€Î¿Ï Îµá½»Ï‰ poreuÅ â€ literally translates as â€œto pursue on a journeyâ€ , â€œcontinue with commitmentâ€ and â€œbecome an adherentâ€ .*

My problem is with the word "literally". The Cambridge dictionary gives the primary definition of literally as:

> *using the real or original meaning of a word or a phrase.*

The problem with this is that in the example above we have three "literal" English meaningsÂ of one Greek phrase, all with different senses. DoesÂ *poreuo* mean "pursue on a journey", "continue with commitment" or "become an adherent"? These are all very different concepts; there is a link between them, but they are not "literally" the same.

The answer to my question is thatÂ *poreuo* means all of them, none of them and something else altogether.

Let me try to explain. With very few exceptions, words do not mean one single thing that can be clearly identified.Â They have a central meaning, which spreads out and extends into related areas. In addition, words take on figurative and colloquial meanings which can be far removed from their original senses. A good example of this is provided by the word "literally", itself, which means the exact opposite of - well - "literally" in a phrase such as "I was literally over the moon".

The meanings of words is fuzzy and to add complication, no two words in different languages are fuzzy in the same way. Words such asÂ *poreuoÂ* and go have the same central meaning, but they don't share the same extended meanings at all. There is no literal translation ofÂ *poreuo* into English. The best we can come up with is an approximation; even using three long phrases as the blog post did, will not capture the full sense of the original.

So why am I bothered about this?

The first thing is that when we talk about literal translation, we minimise some of the difficulties of Bible translation. Words don't have a one for one correspondence, even in related languages like English and Greek; much less between Greek and African languages. The same word may need to be translated in numerous different ways in different contexts.

I'm also concerned that by assuming that words have simple fixed meanings, we can start to impose our own ideas on Scripture, rather than appreciating and understanding the complexity of the documents themselves. A very good example of this is the oft quoted difference betweenÂ *agapeÂ* andÂ *phileo*, two Greek words for love.

Lastly, I am continually bothered by the translation wars in the English language which tout the value of "literal" translations over other sorts of translations. The simple fact is that there is no such thing as a literal Bible translation; if anyone tried to produce such a thing it would be unreadable.

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If you want a reasoned and sensible discussion of the different translations available in EnglishÂ and the philosophies that lie behind them, please read Dave Brunn's One Bible; Many Versions.