PAINTING GREEN THOUGHTS WITH PURPLE PAINT

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Category: Methodology

Most English speaking Christians have some strong feelings about Bible translation. At the very least they know that they prefer the ESV/NIV or other some other TLA (three letter acronym) to all other translations. Others can give long descriptions of the strengths and weaknesses of literal translations (there is no such thing) versus dynamic ones (despite these categories being rather unhelpful).

In my experience there are two basic problems in discussion about Bible translation. The first is that people's view of particular translations are often anecdotal and reflect what the marketing department of the translation publisher says, rather than on a solid analysis of the text - take a look at this book, for more details. The other problem is that most discussions about Bible translation philosophy ignore the sheer complexity of the way that languages work. You simply can't boil things down to dichotomy between literal and dynamic translations. There is far more going on than this sort of formulations can capture.

That being said, this blog post may well be guilty of over-simplification, too. However, it will be a different sort of over-simplification and because of that it may bring something new to the discussion.

What I'd like to do is to capture some of the complexity that occurs when we move from one language to another by viewing the process from three different angles. You won't actually find this stuff in a translator training manual, but I think it accurately captures reality.

Dictionary Translation

Sometimes people see translation as being a simple process of looking up words in a dictionary and substituting the words in language one for those in language two. You change the words (and perhaps make a few adjustment for grammar) and bingo, you've got a translation. In fairness, not many people see translation in this way, though sometimes advocates of particular Bible translations suggest it's the only way to go. The problem with this approach is that words are tricky. Sometimes the same word can mean rather different things:

- I ran a marathon
- I ran a bath
- I ran a company

The thing is that words don't simply mean what the dictionary says they do, their meaning is determined by the context that they are found in. If you used the dictionary translation of "frog" when translating the phrase "I've got a frog in my throat", you'd end sounding as though you had very strange dietary habits!

Usage Translation

Dictionary translation asks the question what word in language two means the same as a word in language one? So the Greek wordÂ *pistis* means faith and translation consists in substituting one for

another. Usage translation asks a much deeper question. How do English speakers express the notions thatÂ *Koine* Greek speakers were expressing when they used the wordÂ *pistis.* This goes beyond a simple dictionary definition and asks questions of the original language and also requires a good understanding of how the target language (English in this case) works in current society. In this sort of situation, it may well be that the translation of a particular word will change according to the context, because there isn't one English word or phrase that can capture all of the nuances of the original.

This sort of translation involves careful study of how the original words are used in different situations as well as an excellent command of English. This is the reason that translators in minority language around the world typically gather many pages of texts and stories in the target language before starting translation. They need to understand how the language works and how different types of information are conveyed.

Thought Based Translation

The two ideas that I've discussed above could be described as code-based models. The meaning is encoded in language one and the job of the translator is to dig out out the meaning and then re-code it into language two. To be honest, in many circumstances, this sort of view is adequate, but it doesn't really capture what is going on when we use language.

If you travel on a crowded train in the UK, you will eventually see someone point at an obviously empty seat and ask "is there anyone sitting here?". An appropriate reply would be, "of course not, can't you see?". However, the reply is far more likely to be, "no, go ahead".

On the surface, the question and answer

- Is there anyone sitting here?
- No, go ahead.

makes no sense at all. However, language doesn't actually work using the code model I mentioned above. Language actually works by sparking though thoughts in the mind of the hearer and causing them to think the thoughts that the speaker wants them to think.

The question "is there anyone sitting here?" isn't actually a request to know whether there is an invisible person in the seat (or perhaps someone who has gone to the loo), it is a polite request for permission to sit down - hence the reply. English is full of these sort of social statements by which we ask permission to do something by saying something else. "Is anyone else cold?" is generally a request to close a window. It's easy to see how this works in these sorts of situations, but linguists have demonstrated that this is how language works even in the simplest and most direct communication.

When Paul wrote his epistles, they triggered thoughts in the minds of his readers which mirrored

Paul's thoughts as he wrote them. He used figurative language and rhetorical phrases to underline certain ideas and to emphasise points he wanted to underline. This all goes beyond a simple code-decode view of communication.

The job of the translator is to find a way to express things in the target language so that they trigger the same thoughts as Paul first sparked off in the minds of his readers. As the title of this post says (I stole this from a friend), we have to paint green thoughts in purple paint.

What this means in practice is that the most important thing in a translation is not getting the words right, but eliciting the right response in the reader. This is far harder to measure, but ultimately far more important.

In a language like English, where there is already a history of Bible translation, things are complicated because there is an understandable desire that new translations should reflect old and familiar wording. What was good enough for King James, is good enough for us. I get this, and I get the desire for a theological continuum in translation. However, we need to remember that English is a special case; most languages don't have anywhere near the number of translations as we do. However, even in English, I think we need to be less concerned about whether Christians are comfortable with a translation and more bothered about whether it communicates to the man on the street.

Meanwhile, there are two thousand languages without a translation available.Â