TRANSLATION ISN'T INTERPRETATION... OR IS IT?

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If you are translating the Bible then you are not interpreting it, right? Well, as with many issues in translation, things are not quite as black and white as many people think.
Category: Methodology

Iâ€™ve been involved in Bible translation in one way or another for over 30 years and along the way I also studied for an MA in Biblical Interpretation. So I thought it would be interesting to look at how translation and interpretation are connected in Bible translation. If you are translating the Bible then you are not interpreting it, right? Well, as with many issues in translation, things are not quite as black and white as many people think.

Letâ€™s start with a concrete example as we look at this:

Revelation 13.1 (NIV)

> *And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.*

If you compare different English translations, there is not much variation; some have â€˜risingâ€™ or â€˜rising upâ€™ rather than â€˜coming out of the seaâ€™. The NET translation has â€˜diademsâ€™ instead of crowns, but basically this is not complicated to translate: a beast with seven heads and ten horns. One might have trouble trying to picture it-even more so as you read the description in the next verse (like a leopard with bearâ€™s feet and a mouth like a lionâ€¦) but on the whole the translator can breathe a sigh of relief that s/he is only translating and not interpreting a passage like this! It is the Bible commentator, the preacher or the reader who will have to decide what on earth the seven heads and ten horns are meant to signify! (I once heard an American preacher explain that the ten horns represented the ten nations of the European Union, though at the time there were already more than ten countries in the EU, but thatâ€™s another story!)

So the translator translates and leaves the interpretation to the reader/scholar/preacher? Well, itâ€™s not quite that simple. Translation inevitably involves some degree of interpretation. It may sound obvious, but first of all you have to understand something before you can translate it. A translator has to research a passage in its original context and language and come to a decision about what it means before he can then re-express this in his/her language. (This is an over-simplification.) But the translator must also understand what the author takes for granted, what information is implicit in the passage, and then decide whether or not to make this explicit for the reader in his/her translation. For example, in Acts 15.20 it has been decided that the Gentiles should â€˜abstain from the things polluted by idolsâ€™ (ESV). Many other translations find it helpful to make explicit what is implied here: The New Living Translation says: â€˜abstain from eating food offered to idolsâ€™ and the Good News version spells it out: â€˜not to eat any food that is ritually unclean because it has been offered to idolsâ€™.

Often, though, translators have to interpret because they are constrained by their language. Many languages in West Africa, for example, (including Kouya) do not have a passive voice. Therefore when translating a verse like Matthew 28.18 (All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to

me) translators need to use the active form and say who is doing the action, like this, for example: God has given me all authority in heaven and on earth. Now in this case itâ€™s not too difficult to work out who the actor or agent is, but in other places it may not be so obvious, yet translators have to make a decision, so they need to interpret.

Or it could be that a certain expression in a language needs an object that is not required in the original language of the Bible. For example in Acts 17.12 (Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.) the texts simply says â€˜believedâ€™, but if itâ€™s not possible in the language to say â€˜believedâ€™ without specifying who they believed in, the translator has to make a decision. So does Luke mean here that they believed in God or in Jesus? If we look at the broader context, we read that Paul and Silas are bringing the Good News about Jesus to the people of Berea, so we can conclude that they believed in Jesus. Also it wouldnâ€™t make much sense to say that Many of the Jews believed in God because Jews already believed in God, but were now also trusting Jesus.

Sometimes languages have grammatical features which can force the translator to make choices that those translating into English, French or Italian for example donâ€™t have to make. Many languages make a distinction between â€˜inclusive weâ€™ (which includes the person/s being addressed) and â€˜exclusive weâ€™ (which doesnâ€™t include the person being spoken to, meaning: â€˜us, but not youâ€™.) This is a feature in Malagasy languages and I wrote about it in another blog post. Since the original Greek does not make this distinction, the translator is forced to interpret; it is mostly obvious which â€˜weâ€™ should be used, but in some contexts the translator has to make a theological decision.

Another complication the translator may have to face is when a language uses different sets of words to show greater or lesser respect. This is the case in the Ntandroy language of southern Madagascar. So for example the word Anjomba is used to translate â€˜houseâ€™ when referring to Godâ€™s house or Temple, whereas traÃ±o is the everyday word for â€˜houseâ€™ (though God would refer to his own house as traÃ±o). This applies to verbs too, depending on whether the person being referred to commands more respect than the person speaking. So in the case of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, when Mary says to the servants: Do whatever he tells you! (John 2.5), referring to Jesus, should the translators use a verb for â€˜tellâ€™ which shows more or less respect?! A mother would normally refer to her son as her inferior, but then did Mary know at this point that Jesus is no ordinary sonâ€¦? Once again, the translator has to interpret the situation and make a theological decision.

I could go on with more examples, but this blog post is already too long. Hopefully though it gives you some insight into the kinds of decisions that Bible translators face and helps you to see that the line between translating and interpreting is a bit more blurred than you thought!