

How Translations Work

The Bible was not originally written in English. We are fortunate, though, to have many excellent English translations. In some ways, this can create a difficulty in trying to determine how to deal with so many translations and choose which translation to use. It is helpful in Bible study to know the issues involved in translating and the various approaches to Bible translation in order to better use English translations.

Issues of Translation

Because of the complexity of language and the differences between languages, translation from one language to another is more complicated than it might seem at first. Someone might assume that translation is as simple of substituting an English word for the corresponding Greek word, but this is not the case.

All words have a range of possible meanings and the ranges rarely (if ever) exactly correspond between different languages. Much more likely, they have overlap in some meanings, and some meanings that do not overlap. For instance, the Greek and Hebrew words translated “son” correspond fairly closely to the English word “son”. But they also have nuances and connotations that are not true for the English word “son.” In some cases, it may be more appropriate to translate these words with a different English word. The Greek word *σάρξ* may be translated “flesh.” But in other contexts, “sinful nature” might be a better translation.

And when translating into English, there may be more than one acceptable word to choose from, and a choice must be made. A translator may ask “Is ‘swift’ or ‘quick’ the best word to use here?” Some of these choices are virtually synonyms and change the meaning very little, but in some cases, there is a significant difference in meaning or connotation depending on which word is chosen.

Languages also have different ways of joining words and forming sentences. Words are often ordered differently in different languages. For instance, in Spanish, *casa* means “house” and *blanca* means “white.” Therefore, *casa blanca* means “a white house.” Notice that the word order is changed. If *casa blanca* were translated literally word for word, it would be “a house white” which would be confusing in English. A translation which would more accurately convey the meaning would switch the word order. *ὁ λόγος ὁ καλός* is literally translated “the word the good” but needs to be translated “the good word” to accurately communicate the meaning.

There are many other features of sentence structure that are different between languages. These need not all be illustrated, but rather just mentioned to show that translation is complicated.

One item worth noting is idioms. An idiom is a word or group of words that has taken on a special meaning that is not related to the normal meaning of the individual words – like “bite the dust” or “off your rocker.” For instance, Peter wrote *ἀναζωσάμενοι τὰς ὀσφύας τῆς διανοίας ὑμῶν* in I Peter 1:13. This could be literally translated “girding up the loins

of the mind of you.” However, the meaning is better conveyed with the translation “prepare your minds for action.”

For these reasons (and others), no translation can perfectly communicate every nuance and emphasis of the original language. In this sense, every translation is a failure (to at least some small extent), and there is no ‘perfect’ translation. Two things must be stated in response to this fact:

- 1) It is not all or nothing. A good translation can convey most of the meaning, even if it cannot perfectly convey every nuance. There is no reason whatsoever to doubt the ability of English Bibles to communicate the Word of God. The message of the Bible is clearly communicated through English translations.
- 2) A good pastor will do the hard work of mining the original languages in order to understand, and then communicate the relevant nuances through preaching and teaching. Every Christian should do all that is reasonably within their power to hear from God’s Word. We can know the Word of God in translation, but we can know it *better* in the original languages. This should be motivation for a conscientious Christian (especially a minister) to continue pursuing Biblical language study to the extent that they are able.

Issues of Inspiration and Inerrancy

The Bible is inspired by God Himself (2 Tim. 3:16-17, 2 Pet. 1:19-21). God worked through human authors, who were fully active in the writing. But in a higher sense, God is also the author of the Bible. Therefore evangelicals confess that the Bible is the Word of God, and is inerrant in all that it claims. We make this claim not only because there is overwhelmingly good evidence to make it, but primarily based on the character of God. God is perfectly true and therefore, that which He speaks is perfectly true.

The traditional term for the conservative (orthodox) view of inspiration is “plenary verbal inspiration.” The word “plenary” means “full” and refers to the fact that all Scripture, and not just parts are inspired. The word “verbal” refers to the fact that the words themselves are inspired (not just the ideas). That is, the choice of words, and even the word forms are intended by God Himself, and therefore, are significant. As Jesus said (Matt. 5:18) even the smallest stroke of a pen in the writing of Scripture is sacrosanct.

It needs to be clarified that this level of inspiration and inerrancy applies to the words that were written by the original authors in the original languages. It does not apply to the same extent to English translations. No translation can claim perfect inspiration and inerrancy.

However, it must also be noted that English translations can claim to be inspired and inerrant to the full extent that they accurately communicate the perfectly inerrant original writing. As argued above, English translations can achieve an extremely high level of faithfulness to the meaning of the original writings, even if 100% perfect faithfulness is not possible. Likewise, English translations can be considered to be the inspired, inerrant Word of God. But we need to be careful not to claim one particular translation is always perfect, and we need to constantly check translations against the original language.

Approaches to Translation

In order to use translations and check them against the original language, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of the various translation theories. There are two basic approaches to translation (and a third approach which needs to be mentioned in this context) The two translation approaches are typically called “Formal Equivalence” (sometimes called “literal,” although this is not quite accurate) and “Functional Equivalence” (also called “dynamic equivalence”). Two helpful terms to know in this discussion are “source language” – the original language of the communication; the language that is translated *from* (in our case, Greek or Hebrew) – and “receptor language” – the language that the communication is translated *into* (in our case English).

Formal Equivalent Translation- The Formal Equivalent approach attempts to stay as close as possible to the form of expression used in the source language, while still making sense in the receptor language. As seen above, it is not possible to always exactly mimic the form of the original language, because in many cases, the resulting translation would not be understandable. The intent of this approach is to keep the form of the original language to the fullest extent possible while still making sense in English.

Functional Equivalent Translation- The Functional Equivalent approach attempts to faithfully communicate the meaning of the source language in the manner which is most natural in the receptor language. The attempt is to communicate the same meaning and have the same impact (function) as if the author were speaking in the receptor language. Therefore, this approach is more open to change word and clause order, to diverge from the form of the original language in order to communicate in a way most appropriate to the receptor language. Functional equivalence seeks to be extremely faithful to the meaning of the original language, but in the form of the receptor language.

Paraphrase – There is a third category. It is debated whether it is legitimate to call this category a translation or not. Some define a paraphrase as only working from English to English, and therefore not involving translation at all. Others argue that a paraphrase can be created even in working with the original language. A Paraphrase is characterized by going beyond merely translating and attempts to give explanation and elaboration. In this sense, a paraphrase functions like a commentary. However the explanatory commentary is contained in the Bible text itself, and not set off in a separate comment section itself. Therefore, it is difficult in a paraphrase to determine what part is a faithful representation of the original text and what part is the author’s explanatory interpretation. Both Formal and functional equivalent involve interpretation to a certain extent. But both of these approaches intend to be strictly governed by the original language text, to convey only the author’s meaning, and to add no extra information or explanation. Paraphrases are not governed by the same restraint. This is not intended as a criticism of paraphrases, but the student must be aware that (like a commentary) a paraphrase is helpful to the extent that the elaboration is accurate and conforms to the intended meaning of the original author. Paraphrases (like commentaries) can be helpful (or harmful), and should be

considered very condensed commentaries, and not be treated as a student's primary Bible for reading and study.

These are not clearly separated categories, but rather a spectrum of approaches. No translation can stay perfectly with the form of the original. And many functional equivalent translations stay closer to the original form than others. Likewise, the line between formal equivalent translations and paraphrases is sometimes blurred. There are many excellent diagrams (the Grasping God's Word textbook, among others) which show most of the available English translations plotted on this spectrum to show which are more formal, which are more functional, and which are toward the paraphrase end of the spectrum.

Which is the Best Translation?

This brings up the obvious question: "Which then, is the best translation approach, and therefore, the best English translation to use for Bible reading and study?" This question is sometimes very hotly debated among Bible scholars.

Among professional linguistics and translators today – such as people working for global businesses or the United Nations – Functional Equivalence is clearly the favored approach. Because it seeks to be extremely faithful to the meaning of the original and understandable in the receptor language, this approach is preferred in these situations. For the same reasons, Functional Equivalence Bible translations are the most readable, understandable, and (in certain aspects) the most accurate.

However, there is one other factor in Bible translation, which is not a factor in UN or business translation. The plenary verbal inspiration of the Bible means that even the form of the original writings is significant. Not just the ideas, but the actual grammatical choices and sentence structure are important. There are literary features woven into the form of the original language that show emphasis, word play, theme connections, etc. These can often be noticed in Formal Equivalent translations where they may be obscured in a Functional Equivalent. For these reasons, (in certain aspects) Formal Equivalent Bible translations are the most accurate.

With this in mind, I would like to offer the following suggestions when choosing the "best" translation:

- 1) Choose the translation appropriate for the purpose of your reading. It is legitimate to use a Functional Equivalent translation for your personal devotional reading, and then use a Formal Equivalent translation for deeper study.
- 2) I would suggest (both for devotional reading and for study) that the more translations, the better. Because there are so many good translations available in English, a student of the Bible should take advantage of comparing multiple versions, especially for serious study.
- 3) To whatever extent is possible, you should go directly to the original languages. No translation is perfect, and working with the very words of the original inspired author helps you to hear God most clearly.

- 4) Even if you become fluent in the original languages, do not give up English translations. We read and study the Bible in community. English translation can act as a safeguard to your understanding of the original. In addition English (or your first language) is your “heart language.” To hear the Bible in the language where you are most fluent gives closest and most clear access to the core of who you are.

How to Use Translations in Bible Study

A serious student of the Bible, and every Christian who wants to know God better is well advised to be in the habit of using multiple Bible translations. Translations are readily available (and cheap) in English, and the student should have a growing collection of translations that are consulted in Bible study.

The reason for using multiple translations is **NOT** to find the one that you like the best or that says it in a way you like. Too many preachers use translations to try to find one that says what they want to say, and not to learn what the Bible actually says. This is not exegesis, but eisegesis, and is counterproductive to understanding and godliness.

Rather, the student should use the various translations as witnesses. Just as a courtroom judge listens to the testimony of all the witnesses (each of whom relates part of the truth about the crime from their perspective), and attempts to piece together all the testimony into a complete understanding of the whole story (as much as possible). So also, the Bible student should hear the testimony of each translation, and from their combined testimony, try to understand the meaning intended by the original author. For instances, some translations of Philippians 3:3 say that we “boast” in Jesus Christ. If we only had that translation, we might misunderstand, because “boast” can have negative connotations of pride in English. When we consult other translations, they say we “exult” in Christ, or “glory” in Christ or “take pride” in Christ. Thinking through how all of these ideas overlap will help us get closer to the meaning of the original word Paul used.

The student should also be aware of the different approaches and characteristics of each translation used. Knowing whether you are reading a Formal Equivalent, Functional Equivalent or Paraphrase will help adjust your understanding in piecing together the combined testimony. Just like in a courtroom, there may be an expert witness who speaks in technical language, and a young child, who knows what they saw, but who won't be able to describe it with the same level of technical precision. There may be a trained reporter who purposely sticks to “just the facts” and there may be a gossip who throws in a lot of conjecture with their testimony. A good judge will ‘adjust’ their understanding of all this testimony based on the character of the witness. In the same way, a Bible reader will recognize that a paraphrase might be taking liberties with a text, and that some translations are purposely written to a 6th grade reading level. Therefore, when this last mentioned translation does not use the fancy theological word, it may not be because the translator does not think it to be an accurate translation, but it was not used because the reader would not understand it and therefore, a simpler (but possibly less accurate) word was used instead.

Finally, when using translations, they should all be (as much as possible) checked against the original writing in the original language.