

## **Translation Philosophies: How to Express God's Word in Today's Language?**

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### Introduction

The new science of archaeology which blossomed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has been an invaluable aid to students of the Bible. Not only has archaeology served to prove many of the Bible's historical details, but archaeology has also changed the way people look at the Bible itself. In 1895, the world was given Adolf Deissmann's *Bibelstudien (Bible Studies)*, which "rendered obsolete virtually all lexica and lexical commentaries written before the turn of the century" (D. Wallace 25).

What Deissmann did was this: he studied the thousands of Greek papyrus manuscripts unearthed in the 1880s and 90s in light of the New Testament. These papyrus manuscripts contained letters and legal and business documents, were written around the time of the New Testament, and were, of course, written in the language of the common people, a language called *koine* ("common") Greek. What Deissmann found was that the language of the New Testament was remarkably similar to this common *koine* Greek. Before this time, 10% of the words in the New Testament had never been discovered in any secular literature. Some scholars, such as Hermann Cremer, described the language of the NT as a sort of "Holy Ghost" Greek – a special language invented by God (D. Wallace 25). Deissmann disproved the Holy Ghost Greek theory and demonstrated that God gave the NT in the language of the ordinary person. The implication for translation is this: if God gave the Bible in the common language of the everyday person, then

the Bible should be translated in the common language of the everyday person.

The problem here is that the English Bibles available at the turn of the century were not written in the common language of the everyday person. The KJV was beleaguered with outdated idioms, odd grammatical constructions, antiquated vocabulary, and words which had changed meanings in the four centuries since they had been written. Likewise, the RV and ASV were notoriously “strong in Greek, but weak in English.” Thus, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been characterized by a quest to find the best method for translating the Bible into understandable English. The fruit of this quest has been the emergence of two competing theories of biblical translation: formal correspondence and functional (or dynamic) equivalence.

#### Formal Correspondence Explained

The traditional approach to translation is formal correspondence. This is the more literal, word-for-word approach to translation. As William Wonderly explains it, “A translation that emphasizes formal correspondence is one that is oriented primarily toward the source message, or the message in its original form, and tries to preserve as much as possible of its grammatical form, sentence and clause structure, and consistency of word usage in terms of the source language” (“Crib” 8).

Thus, a formal correspondence translation

attempts to reproduce several formal elements, including (1) grammatical units, (2) consistency in word usage, and (3) meanings in terms of the source context. The reproduction of grammatical units may consist in: (a) translating nouns by nouns, verbs by verbs, etc.; (b) keeping all phrases and sentences intact (i.e., not splitting up and readjusting the units); and (c) preserving all formal indicators, e.g. marks of punctuation, paragraph breaks, and poetic indentation. (Nida *Toward* 165)

This translation approach is attractive to many because of the great reverence it seems to give to the word of God. There is less room for subjectivity in translating, and it is also the simplest translation process to use. The problem with formal correspondence, however, is that no two languages work the same way. Every language uses a set of verbal symbols (words) all of the thoughts, experiences, objects, and phenomena in the universe, yet “each language is different from all other languages in the ways in which the sets of verbal symbols classify the various elements of experience” (Nida and Taber 19). This means that a truly literal word-for-word translation would be impossible. There is always a certain degree of paraphrasing which takes place. To illustrate the problems with a word-for-word approach, Hugo McCord provides the following literal translations of Matthew 1.18 and Luke 3.14:

of her having been betrothed of the mother of him of Mary to Joseph before to come together them she was found in womb having the Spirit Holy. . .They were asking and him and soldiering saying, what shall we do and we? And he said to them, none shake through nor fig-shine, and be satisfied with boiled food bought of you. (489)

Barclay Newman gives the following short list of examples illustrating why a word-for-word translation is undesirable:

- (1) No single word in any one language overlaps completely in its meaning with any word in another language.
- (2) The sentence structure of one language differs from that of another language.
- (3) Technical terms in one language cannot always be maintained in a second language with the same effectiveness.
- (4) A noun in one language cannot always be translated as a noun in another language, and likewise with other parts of speech.

- (5) Idioms and figures of speech frequently must be changed when being translated from one language into another.
- (6) Pronouns in the source language must often be rendered as nouns in the receptor language in order to make clear who they refer to (“Old” 202-203).

Not only is there a language barrier between the Bible and the modern English-speaking person. There is also over two millennia worth of historical and cultural separation from the biblical world. How then should the Bible be translated in ways that can help the readers cross these barriers? Most modern translators believe the answer is functional equivalence.

#### Functional Equivalence Explained

Functional equivalence is perhaps better known as “dynamic equivalence,” a term apparently coined by Eugene Nida, who wanted to emphasize how a translation should produce the same psychological effect upon the modern reader as it was intended to have upon the original reader. Since 1986, however, the term “dynamic equivalence” has been replaced by “functional equivalence,” since some translators had taken the term “dynamic” to mean “anything which might have special impact and appeal for the receptors” (De Waard and Nida preface). Such translators tried to “embellish or jazz up the text,” distorting the implications of divine inspiration (59). As D. A. Carson notes in his most recent book,

when dynamic equivalence theory was first formulated, it emphasized the importance of producing a receptor text that achieved the same results among its readers. The intention was good, but the formulation slightly silly: in most instances we have very little information about how ancient texts were received. And even if we did, the criterion is not necessarily helpful, as sometimes texts were received very badly (for example, not everyone in Corinth was happy with all of Paul’s letters!)... For this and other reasons,

virtually no one in the field of Bible translation uses the expression “dynamic equivalence” anymore... Those who continue to use it are almost invariably opponents of anything but formal equivalence theory, and for them “dynamic equivalence is a form of opprobrium. (*Inclusive* 70-71)

Nida introduced the new term, “functional equivalence” because it serves to “highlight the communicative functions of translating and to avoid misunderstanding” (DeWaard and Nida preface).

Functional equivalence differs from formal correspondence in that functional equivalence “is oriented chiefly toward the response of the receptors, and thus focuses upon achieving the closest natural way to communicate the same idea in the contemporary language” (Wonderly “Crib” 8). The aim then is not to reproduce the form of the original language using the vocabulary of the receptor language, instead, the aim of FE is to communicate the meaning as clearly as possible using forms native to the receptor language. The basic question in such a translation is, “How would an English-speaking person normally say that?” (Lewis *English* 279). In a functional equivalence approach, “Correctness must be determined by the extent to which the average reader for which a translation is intended will be likely to understand it correctly... we are not content merely to translate so that the average receptor is likely to understand the message; rather we aim to make certain that such a person is very unlikely to misunderstand it” (Nida and Taber 1). “Like all translations, the [Functional Equivalence] translation seeks to be faithful to the text, but seeks that faithfulness at the semantic level – that is, at what the reader understands – rather than at the level of reproducing words, phrases, and grammatical forms. Where both form and content cannot be preserved in the translation, form is sacrificed in the interest of meaning” (Lewis *English* 279).

Functional equivalence also differs from formal correspondence in its procedures. A formal correspondence translation is made by direct transfer, in which “each form in the source language is assigned a form in the receptor language” (Wonderly “Crib” 9), thus the translation will often mimic the source language in terms of style. The result can be a type of “translationese” – a hybrid language which uses idioms and grammatical forms not native to the receptor language (Nida and Taber 13, 100, 124, 125).

Our traditional versions of the Bible, and the in-group religious language that is in turn influenced by them, are not only archaic (using language forms that are no longer in current use); they also use language forms that *never were* in current use. This is due to the interference from Hebrew, Greek, and Latin features of vocabulary, grammar, and style that has come about in the process of translating. We sometimes refer to this as *translationism*. It is most noticeable in the carrying over of Hebrew and Greek idioms into a language where they do not fit (*blessing I will bless, die the death, son of perdition*), but is more subtle (and perhaps a greater impediment to communication) in matters of style. For example, the style of the Pauline epistles, with their heavy use of verb-derived nouns and of intricately related subordinate clauses, is carried over into many of our traditional Bible translations to produce a style which is really foreign to the genius of the receptor language” (Wonderly “Some” 130-131).

Two examples from the highly literal American Standard Version will serve to illustrate this point. First is 2 Corinthians 10.14-16, which says:

For we stretch not ourselves overmuch, as though we reached not unto you: for we came even as far as unto you in the gospel of Christ: not glorying beyond our measure, that is, in other men’s labors; but having hope that, as your faith groweth, we shall be magnified

in you according to our province unto further abundance, so as to preach the gospel even unto the parts beyond you, and not to glory in another's province in regard of things ready to our hand.

In the same Bible, 2 Corinthians 3.10 says, "For verily that which hath been made glorious hath not been made glorious in this respect, by reason of the glory that surpasseth." In these sentences, the words are English, but the grammatical structures are brought over from the Greek. The result is a phraseology which can be comprehended (albeit with some difficulty), but is quite awkward and unnatural in terms of English style. Sometimes the process of direct transfer creates an entirely unintelligible product, such as Job 36.33 in the King James Version: "The noise thereof sheweth concerning it, the cattle also concerning the vapour."

Commenting on this situation, Wonderly says, transposition, or the moderate formal-correspondence type of translation, is ruled out – or ought to be – for Biblical translation... But in point of fact our traditional Bible translations are almost all transpositions! Christians have managed to use them by learning the special variety of language in which they are written – a variety used only in religious contexts –, and people have come not only to tolerate this but to expect Bible language to be this way. ("Crib" 8)

Thus, the problem with direct transfer is that it often creates a product which needs to be re-translated by the interpreter into modern colloquial English. Preachers today spend a shameful amount of time explaining to their audiences the meaning of the text which they are reading from a formal correspondence translation. The purpose of a translation is to make a text understandable. An English translation should not have to be translated again in order to make sense.

Instead of direct transfer, a functional equivalence translation uses indirect transfer, which can be summed up in three steps:

- (1) Analysis or decomposition into basic concepts and kernel sentences within source language.
- (2) Transfer to equivalent kernel forms in receptor language.
- (3) Restructuring or recomposition in receptor language, at desired surface level  
(Wonderly “Crib” 9-11).

In the case of the New Testament, then, the translator will first analyze the sentence in Greek. He will isolate each individual idea expressed in the sentence. These ideas are called “kernel sentences.” For example, consider the following statement from Romans 4.25: “He was delivered up for our wrongdoings, and was raised for our righteousness.” From this sentence, one can derive the following “kernels:” “Jesus was delivered up,” “We did wrong,” “Jesus died because we did wrong,” “Jesus rose from the dead,” and “Jesus rose so we could be called righteous.” Once these kernel sentences have been isolated, the translator can restructure them to state the meaning of the passage in whatever idioms or at whatever language level he desires. It is in this way that meaning is translated without carrying over the form of the original.<sup>1</sup>

The intended result of this process of indirect transfer is what can be called an idiomatic translation. It is an idiomatic approach to translation which “reduces ambiguity and obscurity to a minimum, that makes use of the discourse and stylistic features of the receptor language in a natural way, and that results in a translation that is clear and understandable so that even someone who has had little or no contact with Christianity is able to understand the essentials of the message” (Beekman and Callow 25). “A good modern (English) translation, then, will read in such a way as to appear that it had been produced in English by an American (or Briton)

writing at the time the original was written, reflecting the total context of the original work, but in language and terms intelligible in our time” (Bratcher “Art” 88).

Bratcher quotes Hilaire Belloc as saying that translation is “the resurrection of an alien thing in a native body; not the dressing of it up in native clothes, but the giving to it of native flesh and blood” (“Translating” 290).<sup>2</sup>

The difference between a more literal word-for-word translation and an idiomatic translation can be clearly seen in the following example. First, consider the rendering of 2 Corinthians 6.11-13 in the KJV: “O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged. Ye are not straightened in us, ye are straitened in your own bowels. Now for a recompense in the same, (I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged.”

This passage makes practically no sense in modern English, and illustrates Nida’s statement that “adherence to the letter may indeed kill the spirit” (*Toward* 161). Instead, consider how the NIV translates this verse: “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange – I speak as to my children – open wide your hearts also.”

Here, the NIV explains the idioms and metaphors while still reflecting the basic structure of the original. First, the idiom, “our mouths are open to you,” is changed into the straightforward, “we have spoken freely.” The foreign-sounding “enlarged” heart is changed to the idiomatic expression of the “open” heart. Both of the adjectives, “enlarged” and “open,” are converted into their cognate verbs. The obscure term “straitened” is changed to the more familiar “withholding.” The metaphorical “bowels” (a reference to the body part the Greeks identified as the seat of emotion) is explained as “affection.” The obscure “like recompense” becomes the

more familiar “fair exchange.” Although “be enlarged” made sense to Paul’s original readers, in modern English it suggests that the Corinthians need to put on a little weight. Thus, the NIV returns to the idiom of the open heart. Although the KJV is the more literal of these two translations, the NIV is certainly more accurate.

The New Testament was not written in classical Greek, but in *koine*. It was not written in literary language, but in the everyday Greek of the common person. If God’s original revelation was written in contemporary idiomatic language, then it should remain in such a language. The hybrid “translationese” of literal versions such as the ASV, KJV, and NASB tends to obscure the meaning, and does not do justice to the style and color of the original.

In addition to using the procedure of indirect transfer, a person making a functional equivalence translation must keep in mind several principles, which are presented below as they appear in Nida and Taber 14-32.

The Priority of Contextual Consistency Over Verbal Consistency (or Word-for Word Concordance)

Some believe that a single Greek or Hebrew word in the original should be translated with the same English word every time. Although such an approach might be an aid for proof-texting and word studies by people not skilled in the original languages, there are several factors which make this approach not only impractical, but downright inaccurate. It might be timely to observe that even the KJV translators advised against “identity of phrasing:” “we have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words, as some peradventure would wish that we had done... Thus to mince the matter, we thought to savour more of curiosity than wisdom” (*Translators*).

As Nida and Taber express it, “words cover areas of meaning and are not mere points of

meaning” (15). Every word may have a variety of definitions as well as connotations. To give an example from the English language, the Random House Webster’s College Dictionary lists 110 different meanings for the word “run,” 91 meanings for “take,” and 84 meanings each for “break,” “turn,” and “set.” The exact meaning of a word can only be derived by observing its context. It is for this reason that a word such as σάρξ is rendered by as many as 49 different terms in the NIV. In some contexts, σάρξ refers to the literal flesh of an animal (e.g. 1 Cor. 15.39), or by synecdoche to the body as a whole (e.g. 1 Pe. 4.1). In other contexts, it is highly metaphorical, referring to the darker side of human nature (e.g. Rom. 8.5-12), or to racial identity (Rom. 11.14), one’s physical presence (Col. 2.5), and so on. To use the English word “flesh” in all of these different contexts would be unnatural, and, in many cases, misleading. In fact, “flesh” would be a very poor translation of the word in text such as Romans 8.3; 11.14; Acts 2.17; 1 Corinthians 1.26; and 2 Corinthians 10.3.<sup>3</sup> Although there is some semantic overlap between the Greek σάρξ and the English “flesh,” the two terms do not have identical fields of meaning.

For this reason, FE makes no attempt to render Greek words consistently when the context suggests that different meanings are involved. As the KJV translators said, “there be some words that be not the same sense everywhere” (*Translators*).

#### The Priority of Dynamic Equivalence over Formal Correspondence

This priority is based on one factor: intelligibility of translation. FE looks at the translation process in terms of the receptors rather than the verbal forms involved. If retaining the source document’s grammatical structure, word order, idioms, or figures of speech creates a barrier to understanding, then these forms must be changed to suit the receptor language. As Beekman and Callow assert, form is to be subservient to meaning. The grammar, vocabulary,

and idioms of a language are merely “vehicles,” the means by which meaning is conveyed (346).

In their book, Beekman and Callow illustrate the translation of a text from one language into another using the metaphor of a road and a canal. On the road (the source language), an automobile (representing the lexical and grammatical forms of the source language) can be used to transport supplies (the meaning of the text), but on a canal (the receptor language), a different vehicle is needed, namely, a boat. To put the car into the canal would be foolish. In the same way, the meaning of the source document should be communicated with vehicles (idioms and grammatical forms) from the receptor language (25).

But even beyond the level of clear communication of facts, Nida and Taber recommend that intelligibility is to be measured not only by “whether the words are understandable and the sentences grammatically constructed, but in terms of the total impact the message has on the one who receives it” (22). In other words, “a translation of the Bible must not only provide information which people can understand but must present the message in such a way that people can feel its relevance (the expressive element in communication) and can then respond to it in action (the imperative function)” (24).

There are three functions of language, and each must be addressed by a translation. The first is the informative function, which demands that a translation be thoroughly understandable, with as little ambiguities as possible. The second is the expressive function, which goes beyond the mere transfer of information to include communication’s emotional qualities. Parts of the Bible were meant to be moving. Poetry in translation should still read like poetry, sermons should not be stripped of their rhetorical power, etc. The third function of language is the imperative function, wherein people are challenged to *do* something. Biblical imperatives should be made clear enough so that they can be applied in the present-day context.

Formal correspondence often fails on all three points. Information is obscured when foreign idioms are retained, when grammatical structures from the source language are carried over into the receptor language, when obscure or archaic words are used, and so on. The expressive element of the scriptures are obscured when a biblical writer's impassioned pleas are reduced to dull, monotonous language, when irony and humor are obscured, and so on. The imperative function is lost when a passage is not sufficiently clear to be applicable to today's reader.

#### The Priority of the Heard Language over the Written Language

Paying attention to how a translation sounds when read out loud is particularly important, considering that the Bible is more often heard than read, be it in a sermon, liturgy, on a cassette tape, or on the radio or television. In a written text, one can use capitalization (such as in distinguishing "spirit" from "Spirit") and punctuation to remove ambiguities, and the use of homophones is not a problem. But although a text may be perfectly understandable when read, this does not mean that it will not be misunderstood when read aloud. For example,

in the Revised Standard Version 1 Chronicles 25:1 has the phrase, "prophesy with lyres," which most listeners would interpret as "prophesy with liars," since the use of lyres in prophesying is rare in present-day cultures, but liars who prophesy are in abundant supply. In another English translation, an early draft had a statement, "lead us back to the land, Lord," which in graphic form is perfectly clear, but in oral form would certainly be understood to mean "lead us back to the landlord" (DeWaard and Nida 16).

As Nida says, giving priority to the heard language is advantageous because "one can always be certain that if it can be understood by the average hearer it is more likely to be fully intelligible when it is read silently" (Nida and Taber 31).

### The Priority of the Needs of the Audience over the Forms of Language

Since the purpose of translation is communication, “in the final analysis, a translation is good or bad, right or wrong, in terms of how the reader understand and reacts” (Norm Mundhenk, qtd. in Carson “Limits” 5). In order to ensure proper understanding of the message, the following principles are used:

Non-Christians have priority over Christians. That is to say, the Scriptures must be intelligible to non-Christians, and if they are, they will also be intelligible to Christians. Not only is this principle important in making the translation of the Bible effective as an instrument of evangelism, but it is also necessary if the language of the church is to be kept from becoming an esoteric dialect (Nida and Taber 31-32).

Also, the rapid changes in many languages necessitate that the translator use the language of persons 25-30 years old. While the language of children and teenagers lacks status, the use of language by older people is often becoming obsolescent (Nida and Taber 32).

The needs of the receptors also demand that the Scriptures be translated into *common language*. Common language is that part of a literary language<sup>4</sup> (such as English) where there is overlap between the speech of the educated and the speech of the uneducated. Common language avoids the erudite vocabulary, literary elaborations, and such like, which are not accessible to the uneducated, while also avoiding the slang, vulgar speech, and “incorrect” usages which are not acceptable to the educated (Wonderly “Some” 126-127).<sup>5</sup>

Nida says that before a translation can be considered good, it must meet the following four requirements: (1) making sense, (2) conveying the spirit and manner of the original, (3) having a natural and easy form of expression, and (4) producing a similar response (*Toward* 164). Only an idiomatic translation can do all four of these things effectively, and functional

equivalence (with its indirect transfer methodology) is the best way to arrive at an idiomatic translation.

### Criticisms Against Functional Equivalence

Although, as D. A. Carson observes, “As far as those who struggle with biblical translation are concerned, dynamic equivalence has won the day -- and rightly so” (“Limits” 1), not everyone agrees that Functional Equivalence is a legitimate approach to Bible translation. KJV advocate David W. Cloud, for example, says that “the modern dynamic equivalency method of translation is evil” (6). For the purposes of this study, the various objections to FE will be grouped according to four broad categories. These are based on (1) inspiration, (2) linguistics, (3) the idea that the Bible was meant to be esoteric, and (4) the danger of unduly free translation.

#### Criticisms Based on the Doctrine of Inspiration

The basic objection to functional equivalence is that it shows a lack of respect for the inspiration of the Bible. To many, the doctrine of verbal inspiration necessitates that the Scriptures be translated in a word-for-word manner. As Foy Wallace bluntly puts it, “Accuracy of translation is word-by-word transplantation” (310). This is elaborated in his quotation from R. C. Trench: “The conscientious task is to take the actual word of the original and to transplant it unchanged, in the trust that any strangeness will disappear by time and use, and its meaning acquired by even the unlearned or unlettered reader” (44). Thus, he suggests that the translator should be as literal as possible, and then wait until the receptor language changes to fit the translation. This is highly unrealistic and represents an extreme position.

Wallace furthermore states, “we should educate the people up to the Bible rather than rewrite the Bible down to the people, and to thus preserve its inspired essence and integrity” (47). This view seems to imply that every person who reads the Bible should be expected to learn the

nuances of foreign grammatical structures, as well as foreign idioms and metaphors. But God did not expect the original readers of the Bible to perform such a bizarre task. They did not need a special education in order to understand God's word. He gave it to them in their common everyday language. Should not a translation then be written in the everyday language of the common folk?

In reply to this doctrine, Don Jackson states, "A translation which best represents the *meaning* of the words, idioms, and grammatical structures of the original is faithful to the doctrine of verbal inspiration. These forms were chosen by the Holy Spirit because of the meaning they conveyed. If a translation obscures that meaning, it cannot be called a faithful translation" (48, emphasis mine BH).

Yes, the Holy Spirit did guide the biblical authors in the choices of the very words they used (1 Cor. 2.10-13), but these words were vehicles of meaning. The Revelation is found not necessarily in the words, but in the ideas, in the meanings represented by those words. It is in this way that a translation of the Scriptures can still be called the word of God, for the meaning expressed by the words is the same, whether they be Greek, English, Russian, or Chinese. The conclusion then is that this is not a valid objection. Belief in verbal inspiration does not necessitate a strict literal translation.

Furthermore, those who insist on strict literalism might be asking for more than they bargained for. Consider Milton Fisher's "word-by-word transplantation" of Genesis 33.14, in which, after meeting Esau, Jacob proposes, "As for me, let me lead my gentleness to the foot of the business which is to my face and to the foot of the children that I shall come to my lord to Seir" (31).<sup>6</sup>

The word-for-word approach also fails to take into account the way in which the Bible

itself handles translation. In Nehemiah 8.8, when the Levites translated the law from Hebrew into Aramaic, it says they gave “the sense” rather than translating word-for-word: “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (NIV). When Hebrews 2.7 quotes Psalm 8.5, it changes “you have made man a little lower than God (אֱלֹהִים)” to “you have made man a little (while) lower than the angels (ἄγγέλους).”<sup>7</sup>

Mark 5:41 records that Jesus “said to her, ‘Talitha kum’ (which translated means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise!’).” It is of great significance in this passage that the Aramaic “Talitha kum” would, if translated literally into Greek, be “Little girl, arise.” But what is only implied in the Aramaic has been made explicit (i.e., added) in the Greek: “I say to you.” The inspired biblical author translated for meaning and not just word for word. (Gardner 18)

Thus, one can see that the inspired biblical writers themselves practiced functional equivalence.

### Criticisms Based on Linguistics

Not all objections to FE are based on tradition or theology. There are also controversies dealing with the relationship between form and meaning. As J. P. M. Walsh states the problem, Dynamic equivalence proceeds from the conviction that meaning is (to whatever extent) separate from form, and that dissociation of meaning and form is not only permissible but necessary in order for the translation to serve its function – to communicate to the intended reader... Where do I differ? To put the matter strongly: (1) the “meaning” of a text cannot be dissociated from its form... Biblical texts exhibit the richness and multivalence of poetry. They have many meanings at once. There is no unequivocal “meaning” that can be extracted from the words and images. (“Dynamic” 506-507)

In practical terms, this means that “the best way is to show what the storytellers and poets wanted their audience to see: to be as concrete and specific as possible. If the text speaks of God exalting or lifting up David’s “horn,” then show that, even if one is aware that the “meaning” is that God will make David victorious over his foes” (507).

The problem with Walsh’s criticism here is that the original readers of the OT knew what it meant for God to exalt David’s “horn;” the modern reader does not. A translation should not have to be translated. Meaning should not be sacrificed for the sake of form. As Erasmus said, “Language consists of two parts, namely words and meaning, which are like body and soul. If both of them can be rendered, I do not object to word-for-word translation. If they cannot, it would be preposterous for a translator to keep the words and to deviate from the meaning” (qtd. in Bratcher, “Art” 85-87). In situations such as the one raised by Walsh, there is a compromise which can be made. If the “horn” is retained in the text, it can be explained in the text: “lifting up his horn *in victory*.” This is nothing more than simply making explicit what is already implicit in the text -- a common practice of translators of all persuasions.

#### Criticisms Based on the Intentionally Esoteric Nature of Scripture

Another criticism is that the translators, in trying to make the text as easy to understand as possible, are assuming what is properly the role of the teacher. Fisher raises a valid point when he contends that the Bible was not meant to be understood by absolutely everyone.

God’s written revelation was not directed to or primarily intended for the general mass of unregenerate humanity, for just anybody and everybody. It was directed to a select group within humanity... The Bible is recognized to be a *covenant document*... The persons addressed in this encoded revelation are those who are chosen or elected, called out and initiated as a covenant community. While this verbal formulation is understandable to

those “in the know,” as we say, many things therein always have and always will mystify the outsider. Our Lord declared this with regard to His own teaching in parables (see Matt. 13.13, Mark 4.11, Luke 8.10). (20-21)

He furthermore remarks, “We must realize that the Bible, that collection of sixty-six remarkable Books, was not intended by God to serve as a gospel tract to be left on a street corner as an irresistible eye-opener... The soul turning to the Lord through private reading of the Bible is the marvelous exception rather than the rule” (22).

In addition, Walsh advises,

Translators should be ready to assume that readers are capable of dealing with the text on its own terms – and that a “deacon” [a reference to Philip in Acts 8.30ff.] will make that possible, one who can mediate between those different cultures and worlds of experience. The translation itself is not the place for this mediation. A translator should not take it upon himself to choose one “meaning” and convey it in terms purportedly accessible to readers from another culture. (“Dynamic” 508)

“If the unbeliever is unable to understand the Bible as easily as his pulp novel, the cause is not lost” (Weeks 106). In other words, it is not the job of the translator to decide issues of interpretation, nor is it necessarily his job to make the Bible as easy-to-understand as possible. The role of explanation and interpretation should be left to the teacher.

In response to this criticism, Beekman and Callow say,

An idiomatic translation makes it easier for the teacher to expound the Scriptures on the basis of the text before him... There is a very real danger if the teacher is constantly having to correct the translation... then the believers will tend to assume that *only* those who have the gifts of training of a teacher can understand the Word of God. They will

gradually abandon their privilege of doing as the “noble” Bereans did, who “searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). But the conclusion to depend on the teacher to make the Word understandable defeats the very purpose of translation which is that everyone should have direct access to God’s word in his own language. (349)

#### Criticisms Based on the Danger of Unduly Free Paraphrase

In the minds of many, once the form of the original documents is abandoned, this opens the floodgates for all kinds of personal doctrines, opinions, and interpretations to be inserted into the text. Indeed, unduly free paraphrases found in the original *Living Bible* and others like it only serve to confirm such fears. And these fears are not unwarranted. The enhanced need for a responsible, unbiased approach to translating under the FE approach has led its proponents to recommend that all such translations should be done by committees rather than individuals (e.g., Nida and Taber 174ff; De Waard and Nida 191).

Functional Equivalence translations are often charged with being “interpretations, not translations.” But it should be kept in mind that “All translators somehow interpret the Bible. The so-called objective, scientific translation does not exist. We all have to recognize that the moment we try to understand what the author wanted to say, we begin to interpret the message” (Eugene Nida, qtd. In Fueter 344). FE translations are also frequently reviled as “paraphrases.” Yet all translations paraphrase to some degree. The aforementioned language barriers make it impossible not to. As Nida says, “there are legitimate and illegitimate paraphrases.” Thinking about translations in terms of the number of corresponding words “is practically useless. It really should make no difference to us whether a translation of a term in Greek consists of one or five words.. Our objective must be in finding the closest equivalence in meaning” (“Translation”

105).

Although formal correspondence and functional equivalence are the most popular approaches to biblical translation, one can enumerate two other categories. There is the highly literal translation, which makes little or no attempt to use English style. An interlinear translation would be an example of a highly literal one. There is also the paraphrase. Currently, the term paraphrase is typically used to distinguish a one-person translation in which the translator restates the text in his own words. Philipps' translation and Kenneth Taylor's *Living Bible Paraphrased* are both examples of paraphrases, as is the satirical *Cotton Patch Version*. In their book, Beekman and Callow classify translations according to the following chart:

<b>UNACCEPTABLE TYPES</b>			
<b>ACCEPTABLE TYPES</b>			
<b>HIGHLY LITERAL</b>	<b>MODIFIED LITERAL</b>	<b>IDIOMATIC</b>	<b>UNDULY FREE</b>

A “highly literal” translation is one which “reproduces the linguistic features of the original language with high consistency. The result is a translation which does not adequately communicate the message to a reader who does not know the original language” (21). Equally unacceptable is the “unduly free” translation, which contains “distortions of content, with the translation clearly saying what the original neither says nor implies” (23). The “modified literal” translation is produced when the translator strives to be as literal as possible, yet does make corrections when he perceives that the translation is communicating error. “The resultant translation contains unnecessary ambiguities and obscurities and will be unnatural in style and difficult to comprehend” (24). Such a translation can still be useful for those who have access to reference works and a high motivation to study. The NRSV and NKJV are examples of

“modified literal” translations. In an “idiomatic” translation, “the translator seeks to convey to the receptor language readers the meaning of the original by using the natural grammatical and lexical forms of the receptor language” (24). This approach is now generally understood to be the best. The NIV is a well-known example of idiomatic translation.

By looking at the various major translations produced in this century, one can trace the development of the different translation philosophies and their relative popularities. The oldest major translation in popular use today is the King James Version (also known as the “Authorized Version,” although this is somewhat misleading<sup>8</sup>), published in 1611. Like all of its contemporaries, the KJV is a formal correspondence translation. The KJV was superior to the Bibles which preceded it, yet its literal approach has created some readings which are hardly intelligible in English, such as Job 36.33: “The noise thereof sheweth concerning it, the cattle also the vapor.” The main problem with the KJV is the presence of numerous archaisms and words which have changed meaning, although this does not reflect on the KJV’s translation philosophy.

In the late nineteenth century, an effort was undertaken to make a new translation to replace the KJV. The result was the British Revised Version (1885), and its later revision, the American Standard Version (1901). Rather than moving toward a freer type of translation, these versions were even more literal than the KJV. The resulting translation incorporated so many Semitisms and Greek grammatical structures that it was branded “strong in Greek, but weak in English.”<sup>9</sup> Not only did the ASV strive to be quite literal, but the translators made it their policy to use KJV-style English. As Jack Lewis states, “Because the ASV tried to use the vocabulary of Tudor and Jacobean authors (16th-17th century), it was an artificially created antique when it appeared... The language of the ASV is translation English, not the native idiom. It is a language

that was never spoken or written in any country at any time” (*English* 98, 97). Because of their rugged style, the RV and ASV were never extremely popular among everyday churchgoers, and the ASV is presently even out of print.

The next major Bible version was a revision of the ASV – the Revised Standard Version. The purpose of this Bible was mainly to update the language of the ASV. Although the RSV corrected the grammar of the ASV and removed many archaisms, it was still quite a literal translation. Like the RV/ASV, the RSV failed to replace the KJV.

The shift from formal correspondence to functional equivalence translations occurred in the mid-1960s. In 1966, the New Testament of the Good News Bible (Today’s English Version) was published, followed by the complete *Living New Testament* in 1967. The TEV with both the Old Testament and New Testament was released in 1976. The complete *Living Bible Paraphrased* was published in 1971.

The *Living Bible Paraphrased* was the work of one man, Kenneth Taylor, who took the American Standard Version and rephrased it in his own words. Not being a biblical scholar, Taylor’s work contained numerous inaccuracies, so much so that Jack Lewis could state that “scholarly notices of his paraphrase have almost without exception been unfavorable” (*English* 246). Lewis’s own conclusion is that the *Living Bible*

is not sufficiently reliable to be useful for serious study by any person who is concerned over the details of what the Word of God says either in historical matters or in doctrinal matters... the person who is unable to make detailed comparison of the paraphrases with the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek statements can never be certain that he is not being misled. (*English* 260)

Despite its inaccuracies, though, the *Living Bible* was an instant bestseller. As of 1996, there

were over 40 million copies in print (NLT preface). The success of the *Living Bible* was a wake-up call to Bible translators, testifying to the fact that people were hungering for a Bible that was easy to read and understand.

The Good News Bible (also known as “Good News for Modern Man,” the GNB, or the TEV) New Testament was also the work of one man, Robert Bratcher of the American Bible Society. A committee of seven was chosen to translate the Old Testament. The translators of this version aimed at creating an idiomatic translation written at an elementary school reading level and aimed at non-Christians. As Jack Lewis observes, “The shifting from traditional theological language to language as common as that used in the newspaper – in many cases with a gain in accuracy in communication – is everywhere evident in the GNB... A long list of examples can be compiled where simplicity is gained in the GNB without change of meaning” (*English* 271). Sold originally for just 25 cents a copy (262), the TEV/GNB made its way into many homes, and proved that an easy-to-read, yet effective and accurate functional equivalence translation could be produced.

The New International Version New Testament was released in 1973, with the entire Bible appearing in 1978. Although the NIV was much less of a paraphrase than the *Living Bible* and the TEV, its translators nevertheless claim that it is “more than a word-for-word translation” (NIV preface). The *Living Bible* and the TEV had been written in such simple language that they lacked literary quality. The NIV, however, intended to “have literary quality and so prove suitable for public and private reading, teaching, preaching, memorizing, and liturgical use” (NIV preface).

Despite being harshly criticized by many religious traditionalists, the NIV has consistently been the top-selling Bible version for almost two decades. With the success of the

NIV, functional equivalence has become the mainstream method of biblical translation. The years following the NIV’s publication have seen an explosion in new functional equivalence translations and paraphrases. The only major formal correspondence translations to be released thereafter have been the New King James Version and the New Revised Standard Version. The following chart will serve to illustrate the translation approaches of today’s most popular Bible versions.

**Major Bible Translations on a Continuum of Literal to Paraphrase:**

Highly Literal	Formal Equivalence		Dynamic Equivalence		Paraphrase
Interlinears ASV (1901)	KJV NASB	NKJV RSV NRSV	NIV	NLT TEV (Good News) CEV	Living Bible InclusiveVersion Phillips

- ASV = American Standard Version
- CEV = Contemporary English Version
- KJV = King James Version
- NASB = New American Standard Bible
- NIV = New International Version
- NKJV = New King James Version
- NLT = New Living Translation
- NRSV = New Revised Standard Version
- RSV = Revised Standard Version

It can be seen from this chart that the modern reader has a wide variety of translation possibilities from which to choose, and that the most recent translations have tended to reflect the functional equivalence approach. The next chart will illustrate the translation philosophy and reading level of several popular translations.

**Chart: Translation Methodology and Reading Level**

*source: Tyndale House website*

Hard To Read	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	KJV		
	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade			
	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	NASB		
	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade			
Avg. Adult Level	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade		NIV	<i>Living Bible</i>
	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	NRSV		
	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	NKJV	NLT	<i>Message</i>
Chil- dren's Bibles	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade		CEV	
	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade		ICB	
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade		NiRV	
		Formal Correspondence	Functional (Dynamic) Equivalence	Paraphrase

- CEV = Contemporary English Version
- ICB = International Children's Bible, New Century Version
- KJV = King James Version
- NASB = New American Standard Bible
- NiRV = New International Readers Version
- NIV = New International Version
- NKJV = New King James Version
- NLT = New Living Translation
- NRSV = New Revised Standard Version

As this paper has demonstrated, functional equivalence is a valid approach to biblical translation. It is in fact the best approach for producing a Bible which will be used in teaching children, the average English reader, and especially people who have no background in Christianity. Formal correspondence translations will still be useful for those who take the time to study and familiarize themselves with the style of the language. As many have said, the best method of Bible study is to compare various translations, both formally and functionally oriented. The day is gone, however, when FE translations can summarily be dismissed as nothing but paraphrases. Effective FE translations such as the TEV, NIV, and NLT are becoming more and more popular as they express God's holy word in a language which modern English-speakers can understand and appreciate.

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## Endnotes

1. There are additional factors to be considered in indirect transfer. For example, the first step begins with identifying the parts of the source message as objects, events (which are often expressed in Greek as nouns), abstracts, and relationals. The participants in the events must be noted explicitly (often they will only be implicit in the original text) (Wonderly *Crib* 9-11). Indirect transfer is discussed at length in Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* chapter 3.

2. Martin Luther took an idiomatic approach to his translation of the Bible, saying, “I endeavored to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew” (Bratcher *Nature and Purpose of TEV* 99).

3. The Greek word *sarx* is an excellent example of the fact that one word can have different meanings in different contexts. Regarding this word and its traditional translation as “flesh,” Nida comments,

for most persons “flesh” has only three meanings: (1) meat which may be purchased at the butcher’s (but this is slightly obsolescent), (2) the flesh of a person, *e.g.*, “She has put on a lot of flesh,” or “That person is fleshy,” and (3) sex, which is becoming increasingly a central meaning.

Nida took a survey of approximately fifty Bible translators, and asked them to evaluate the following renderings of *sarx*:

	<u>ASV</u>	<u>NEB</u>	<u>TEV</u>
1. Luke 24.39	flesh	flesh	flesh
2. 2 Cor. 7.5	flesh	poor body	we
3. Rom. 11.14	flesh	men of my own race	people of my own race
4. Acts 2.17	flesh	everyone	men
5. Rom. 8.3	flesh	lower nature	human nature
6. 2 Cor. 10.3	flesh	weak men	world... worldly
7. 1 Cor. 1.26	flesh	human standard	human point of view

Asked to evaluate the ASV’s translation in these passages (consistently translated “flesh”), their judgment was as follows: Good: 1; Unnatural: 2; Misleading: 3,4,6; Unnatural and misleading: 5,7. In all but the first instance (Luke 24.39), “flesh” in present-day English does not fit the context (*Theory* 17).

4. Wonderly defines literary languages as:  
languages that are spoken by relatively large numbers of people, which represent a complex and socially stratified society, and which have a literary tradition such that the well-educated or “cultured” person is expected to have a command of the language superior to that possessed by the uneducated person (*Principles* 126, cf. *Bible Translations* 3).

5. For an in-depth discussion of this matter, see Wonderly, *Bible Translations for Popular Use*, chapter 5, as well as Nida, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, chapter 7.
6. Bratcher gives a somewhat humorous example of over-literalism. In the KJV, 2 Kings 19:35 has, “and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses” (cf. Isa. 37:36).
7. An additional example is Acts 15.17, which changes “Edom” to “men” when quoting Amos 9:12.
8. According to Lewis,  
The tradition that the King James Bible was authorized seems to rest merely upon a printer’s claim on the title page which continued the phrase from earlier Bibles “Appointed to be read in Churches.” There are extant proclamations and canons about Matthew’s, Cranmer’s, and the Bishops’ Bibles..., but history has no record of an official authorization of the KJV. (*English* 35)
9. This statement is attributed to Charles H. Spurgeon (Lewis *English Bible* 76).