

# TL-Oriented Approach to Bible Translation: For or Against?

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## Abstract

*The problem of translating a book – a and not just a common book – that did, and perhaps still does, influence a huge number of people all over the world, arose from the minute Christianity started spreading.*

*Must the translator respect the sacredness of the text and the fact that no one has the right to alter the word of God, as the Church claims, and thus the translator should stick to a close Source Language (SL) approach, or must he correct and change what he thinks appropriate according to the culture and mentality of the people to whom he refers to [Target Language (TL) approach]? Is the translator a 'heretic' who deprives the Bible of its holiness because he misinterprets its meanings or is he simply trying to get through to the people reading the translated Bible and transmit the message it conveys?*

*In this essay, religious, historical and social arguments will be presented for both approaches of Bible translation. In the first part, opinions and facts for a TL-oriented approach will be stated, whilst in the second part, issues against a TL-oriented approach will be put forward.*

*It can be deduced that the majority of the translators in the past and in the present time tend to prefer a TL-oriented approach for the Holy Bible. This, of course, does not imply that there is not a large number of translators and experts of theology who choose a SL approach.*

*The choice between a TL or a non-TL approach for the translator can be quite difficult and demanding for his work, but the same choice for a reader, and more importantly, for a religious reader can be determinative of his way of thinking and, perhaps, of his whole life.*

Key words: Bible, sense, text.

## Introduction

As Christianity started spreading, the need for communication and diffusion of the religion became evident. The dissemination of the word of God depended upon the translation of the Bible and that is the reason why a vast number of translators from different countries and civilizations were involved in the difficult task of translating the Scriptures. The International Bible Society recorded: "Currently, at least a portion of the translated Scriptures exists in more than two thousand languages, spoken by over ninety percent of the world's population" (<http://www.ibs.org/niv/munger/1.php>). In addition, Benson Bobrick claims: "Next to the Bible itself, the English Bible was (and is) the most influential book ever published"(2003:1). The problem of translating a book – and not just a common book – that

did, and perhaps still does, influence a huge number of people all over the world, arose from the very beginning.

Must the translator respect the sacredness of the text and the fact that no one has the right to alter the word of God, as the Church claims, and thus the translator should stick to a close Source Language (SL) approach, or must he correct and change what he thinks appropriate according to the culture and mentality of the people to whom he refers to [Target Language (TL) approach]? Is the translator a 'heretic' who deprives the Bible of its holiness because he misinterprets its meanings or is he simply trying to get through to the people reading the translated Bible and transmit the message it conveys?

Translating the Scriptures had been a main issue, especially in the period of the Reformation, since it involved the query of old and strong beliefs. In this essay, religious, historical and social arguments will be presented for both approaches of Bible translation. In the first part, opinions and facts for a TL-oriented approach will be stated, whilst in the second part, issues against a TL-oriented approach will be put forward.

It must be noted that no attempt is made to give a definite answer to the problem of how to translate the Holy Bible, since the problem is a complex one and it is not based on certain facts but merely on opinions that concern not only translators but every one of us.

## TL-oriented

St. Jerome (346- ), John Wycliffe (1330-1384), William Tyndale (1494-1536) and Martin Luther (1483-1546) were translators who decided and indeed translated the Holy Bible sense for sense rather than word for word; that is their translations were TL-oriented.

St. Jerome, who was commissioned by Pope Damasus to translate the New Testament in 384, decided to translate the Bible into idiomatic Latin so that it could be accessible to all people and although his work was of a great value – "work of great magnitude" (Bobrick, 2003:5) – it was not accepted by the Church, and it was considered a heretical version. As quoted in Making the English Bible, St. Jerome explained the problem he faced and the choice he made to translate sense for sense: "If I correct errors in the Sacred Text, I am denounced as a falsifier; if I do not correct them, I am pilloried as a disseminator of error" (Bobrick, 2003:6). At this point, it must be noted that St. Jerome's translation was admired and commonly used by many Christians (his translation is known as Vulgate) and has also influenced many translators in the following years.

John Wycliffe, an expert in theology, fought against a range of abuses of the Church and explained that, according to his point of view, the Holy Bible is greater than the Church as an institution, and that it should be easy to understand. Thus, based on the Vulgate, he translated the Bible for the layman, as he claimed, using the vernacular. Both Wycliffe and his followers, the Lollards – who were accused as heretics – translated according to the meaning of each different sentence as clear as possible. Susan Bassnett quotes from Parvey's Preface: "the translator shall translate 'after the sentence' (meaning) and not only after the words, 'so that the sentence be as open [plain] or opener, in English as in Latin and go not far from the letter'" (1991:47).

William Tyndale attacked the Church because he rejected the fact that it was not allowed to read the Holy Bible in a native language and he printed his TL-oriented translation of the New Testament. He firmly believed that the Scriptures should be as clear as possible to all laymen and that people can capture the meanings of the Bible only if they read it in their own language.

"Tyndale's proclaimed intention in translating was also to offer as clear a version as possible to the layman [...]" (Bassnett, 1991:47).

Martin Luther, a German theologian and the main representative of the Protestant's Reformation, translated into German the New Testament based on the Greek text and not on the Vulgate translations. His translation not only affected the German language and grammar, but also the faith of the German people.

"In the case of German, Luther's great translation was to produce virtually a new language, and scholars date modern 'High German' from the publication of his Bible" (Steven Prickett, 1999:21).

"[...] the brilliance of Luther's personality and teaching was greatly established into the mind of the German people" {my translation} (ΙΩ. ΦΕΙΔΑΣ, 1986:311).

By referring to the above authorities, it is intended to indicate the thoughts and beliefs of experts on the specific matter of translating the Bible sense for sense and not word for word. It can be deduced, by the opinions of people who studied the Bible and its translation – such as the ones mentioned above – that a TL approach of the Holy Bible is meant to make the deeper meanings of the Scriptures accessible to all people and not only to the rich and educated, who could, at that time, study Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Every sentence of the word of God has a purpose, a significance, which obviously can be understood more easily when it is rendered into each person's mother tongue.

Another important point that must be noted, and it can be considered one more reason why the Bible can be translated according to the meaning, is the differentiation not only between thoughts and mentalities, but also between cultures. As Mary Snell-Hornby explains: "[...] language is not seen as an isolated phenomenon suspended in a vacuum but as an integral part of culture" (1988:39). For the layman, it was not simple, and probably it is not even now, to understand the complexity and the differences of another language and, thus, of another culture. Accordingly, a justifiable question is whether, for example, the lamb of God – Agnus Dei – can be easily perceived as an image and as a meaning by the Eskimos, who have probably never seen a lamb before or whether the Japanese can understand the structure of a phrase of Greek and Latin which is subject-verb-object, while in Japanese is subject-object-verb.

Last but not least, it appears that all the translators mentioned above did influence, and perhaps they still do, thousands of ordinary people that have read their translations of the Bible and in this way, they have influenced the following generations and, of course, many translators. Hence, the fact that thousands of people did, and still do, accept a TL approach of the Bible, indicates that the translators themselves should agree that this kind of approach is a reasonable and acceptable choice.

## SL-oriented

On the other hand, it can be argued that a TL-oriented Bible translation can create many wrong speculations on the meanings of the Scriptures and, thus, misinterpretations not only of the Holy Bible itself, but also and more importantly, misunderstandings of the Christian religion and the notion of faith in general. Umberto Eco states that: "Translators must negotiate with the ghost of a *distant author* 'my emphasis' [...]"(2003:173), and in the case of the Bible the author is more than a distant one, since the Holy Bible was written by humans who were inspired by God. Thus, it can be claimed that no 'negotiation' can be made on the style and form of the particular text, since every word written contains the 'mark' of God Himself.

The necessity of a SL-oriented approach to Bible translation, that is a non-TL approach, was, and still is, strongly supported by the ecclesiastic authorities, who considered all TL-oriented Bible translations as heresies and their translators as heretics. According to the Church, the translator must not try to clarify a meaning that he believes ambiguous, because this clarification deprives from the priest the possibility to explain to the layman the correct and exact meaning of the word of God. A problem, for example, that is still discussed amongst the experts of theology is the Hebrew word *alma*, which has two meanings and it refers to Virgin Mary. *Alma* means either a virgin or a young woman. If a translator decides to translate *alma* by using the second meaning, then the whole image of the Madonna and the fact that she is different from all other women and people in general, should be drastically changed.

Moreover, in order to highlight the problems of a TL approach of the Bible, it must be noted that according to Peter Newmark the translator can never be neutral as far as issues of morality are concerned.

"Translators cannot be neutral, where matters of fact or morality are concerned. They have to intervene, inside or outside their texts" (1993:79).

As a result, a SL-oriented approach, without any interference or subjectivity, can be considered the safest way to translate the Holy Bible, since the text mainly regards matters of morality and a certain way of living. It is, in fact, very difficult, for a translator, not to get involved in his translation, the same way an author is involved in his writings, especially because all people – and this includes translators – have their own ways of interpreting information and especially when it comes to matters of religion and beliefs. Besides, that is the reason why no translation is ever the same and it never produces the exact same effects to the readers, even though the source text is the same.

Another important issue, when using a TL-oriented approach, is the matter of style. Eugene Nida explains that: "An easy and natural style in translating, despite the extreme difficulties of producing it – especially when translating an original of high quality – is nevertheless essential to producing in the ultimate receptors a response similar to that of the original receptors" (A-2004:160). When the translator decides on a sense for sense translation, it is easy to lose many of the sentiments created by the exact words used in the source text because the flow of the text can be altered. In particular, the Bible addresses the sentiments of the people and their reactions when they are reading it. Hence, the text, not only must it flow naturally, but it must also create the same feelings as the source text and that, in most cases, implies a close SL-oriented translation, that is an identical flow to the original one. It can be claimed that a translation of the Scriptures can be popular because of its rhythm and its poetic qualities, even if, for many readers, it is difficult to understand it, since by remaining very close to the source text, the sacredness of the original is preserved.

An additional positive aspect of maintaining the style of the original Bible can be seen in William Tyndale's translation. He introduced from Hebrew many new phrases and words into the English language that are still in use today. He used the Hebrew form 'noun + of + noun' and kept many compound words. Benson Bobrick cites many examples such as "a book of Moses", "a man of strength", "scapegoat", "passover" (2003:116). Thus, it can be concluded that the use of a SL approach of the Bible enriched the English language and many other languages in the same way.

Last but not least, there are many Bible translators who insist on a literal translation because they strongly believe that the ability to understand the exact text of the Scriptures indicates the spiritual closeness of the reader to God, albeit the text is not clear or well structured. Eugene Nida states that: "Some even justify the awkwardness and obscurities of literal renderings by insisting that the capacity to comprehend such a text can be a measure of the spiritual insight granted to readers by God" (B-1998:26).

It can be argued that all readers of the Holy Bible should have the right to make their own judgments and decisions on the meanings, which the author wanted to transfer, without any other opinion-interference on behalf of the translator. Religion and faith is totally a personal matter and the explanation of the Scriptures should only be entrusted to the messengers of God, that is to the priests.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, no certain answer can be given to all the arguments mentioned above, since each problem is based on a theoretical point of view of a translator. It can be deduced that the majority of the translators in the past and in the present time tend to prefer a TL-oriented approach for the Holy Bible. This, of course, does not imply that there is not a large number of translators and experts of theology who choose a SL approach.

Briefly, in the case of a sense for sense translation, the main target is to transfer the meanings of the Scriptures to the reader as easily as possible. This can be succeeded by using the mother tongue of the reader and by bearing in mind the different culture and mentality of the people to whom the translator addresses. In addition, it must be remembered that the first translators who chose a TL approach were all authorities on their fields and they have not only influenced generations of translators but also many generations of laymen, of ordinary people who studied the Bible and, hence, the religion of Christianity.

On the other hand, a TL-oriented approach may create many problems to the translators and to the readers, such as misinterpretations and misunderstandings, unnatural flow of the text with different style and form from the original and finally the interference of the translator who does not allow the reader to find out by himself the meanings of the word of God and to form his own faith and beliefs. Besides, the word for word translation of the Bible has enriched the grammar and the syntax of many languages, such as English, through all this interaction of languages and cultures.

The choice between a TL or a non-TL approach for the translator can be quite difficult and demanding for his work, but the same choice for a reader, and more importantly, for a religious reader can be determinative of his way of thinking and, perhaps, of his whole life.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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