Bible Translation as Bilingual Quotation

Presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of
the Evangelical Theological Society

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In recent years the religion of Islam has assumed much greater prominence in western society than ever before. One of the striking differences between Islam and Christianity is that Muslims revere the Koran as God's word and, consequently, insist that it must be read only in Arabic, the language of Mohammed. In contrast, Christianity from its earliest days has translated the Old and New Testaments into the languages of the world and proclaims those translations to be the Word of God for all intents and purposes. One of the corollaries of the Protestant Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* was the publication of the Bible in the language of the people; in fact, the Reformation probably would not have succeeded without Luther's translation of the Bible into German.

The question of the authority of Scripture in translation is of course one that deeply concerns evangelicals whose doctrine locates divine inspiration, and consequently inerrancy and authority, in autographs written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; and yet we confidently preach the authority of God's word in English translation. This raises interesting questions at the theoretical level about what I would call an evangelical philosophy or theology of language and at the level of praxis about what relationship must

a translation of Scripture have to the original in order to have God's authority behind it. It is this latter question of praxis that I focus on here.

Evangelicals claim that because God's authority is behind the words of the original texts of the Bible, his authority also stands behind translations of the Bible into other languages *as long as the translations are faithful to the original*. However, what constitutes faithfulness to the original has been hotly contested among evangelicals lately. Currently the debate seems to be stalled on whether formal equivalence (also referred to as formal correspondence)–where the syntactical forms of the original text is preserved in translation as much as possible–is more consistent with an evangelical doctrine of Scripture than is functional equivalence (also referred to as dynamic equivalence) which aims to communicate the meaning of the original even if elements such as word order, lexical correspondence, and syntactical structure are not preserved in the translation.[1] The heat this

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[1] Arguing for functional equivalence are, for instance, D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation–and Other Limits Too," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World: Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood* (eds. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 65-113; Mark L. Strauss, "Do Literal Bible Versions Show Greater Respect for Plenary Inspiration? (A Response to Wayne Grudem)" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the ETS, Valley Forge, PA, Nov. 16, 2005); Mark Strauss, "Form, Function, and the 'Literal Meaning' Fallacy in Bible Translation," *The Bible Translator* 56/3 (July 2005) 153-168; Mark L. Strauss and Gordon D. Fee, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

Those defending formal equivalence are Wayne Grudem, "Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God? Why Plenary Inspiration Favors 'Essentially Literal' Bible Translation in *Translating Truth* (Wheaton: Il.: Crossway, 2005), 19-56; Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002); and Raymond Van Leeuwen, "We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation," *CT* 45/13 (Oct. 2, 2001), 28-35.

argument has generated–especially if one is on the hot seat as a Bible translator–is almost enough to make one envy Muslims, who have solved the problem simply by disallowing translation of their sacred text at all.[2]

As you may know, just about every Bible translation has stirred hot controversy ever since the first one, the Septuagint, was produced. The New Testament writers later quoted the Greek translation of the Old Testament frequently as they proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ in the writings that we receive, together with the Old Testament, as God's divinely inspired and authoritative word. Although the Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible were used in the ancient Greek-speaking synagogues for centuries, the idea of Bible translation was controversial even in those times. By the second century of our era, we find within the Talmud the statement that, "The day on which the Greek translation was made was as ominous for Israel as the day on which Israel made the Golden Calf in the wilderness; for the Torah could not be translated adequately" (Sefer Torah 1.8).[3]

Skepticism about the fidelity of translations to the original grew over time so that segments of Judaism eventually opposed any translation of the Bible. The Talmud puts the translator between a rock and a hard place when it states that "he who translates literally is a liar, while he who adds anything (by way of paraphrase) is a blasphemer" (Bab. Talmud Qidd. 49a; Tosefta, Meg. 4.41). And so we see that evangelicals are not the first to recognize

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[2] However, with more westerners who do not read Arabic becoming Muslim, this same controversy is on the rise within Muslim communities in North America. See Neil MacFarquhar, "New Translation Prompts Debate on Islamic Verse," *New York Times*, March 25, 2007.

[3] *The Minor Tractates of the Talmud. Massektoth Ketannoth,* vol. 2, A. Cohen, trans. (London: Soncino Press, 1971), 632.

how serious are the issues involved in transferring the meaning of God's word from one language into another.

These ancient attitudes towards the translation of religious texts make it all the more remarkable that the apostles of Jesus Christ apparently did not hesitate to preserve the Lord's teachings in Greek translation or to use the Greek translation of the Old Testament authoritatively in their writings that became the New Testament.[4] Therefore, the example of the divinely inspired New Testament writers themselves provides the warrant for the translation of Scripture into other languages.

Passages such as Genesis chapters 1, 3 and 11, Acts 2 and Revelation 14 trace out a biblical theology of language that provides for Christians controlling beliefs about language in general and translation in particular. Consequently, Christians, unlike Muslims and orthodox Jews, are not only warranted to translate the Bible into the languages of the world, but have a mandate to do so. That means Christians also have the task of thinking deeply about the theory and practice of Bible translation that will preserve the authority of Scripture in translation.

Where might we look for other examples of what characterizes translation where accurately and faithfully representing the source is of paramount importance? The practice of bi-lingual quotation has in common with Bible translation a commitment to faithfully representing its source language.

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[4] And for this, Christianity has been faulted in some Jewish thought. See José Faur, *Golden Doves With Silver Dots. Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 50.

Quoting God: Translation as bilingual (inter-lingual) quotation

The practice of bi-lingual quotation has found a growing place with the increasing globalization of modern life. Simultaneous translation, which is called simultaneous interpretation in the literature of linguistics, is a service provided at international meetings so that participants might speak and follow the proceedings in their own languages. The United Nations uses six official languages requiring simultaneous translators working in thirty-six different language pairs; the eleven official languages used at the European Union results in 110 possible bi-lingual combinations.[5] Because of the growing importance of accurate, authoritative translation in the highly charged forums of the United Nations and the European Union, the practice of simultaneous interpretation has enjoyed increasing study by linguists over the last thirty years.

The mysterious ability of the human brain to listen in one language while speaking in another is probably the most spectacular of all translation work. Linguistic studies based on tapes of professional simultaneous translation between various pairs of languages yield some results that address the question of how fidelity to the original language is achieved in bi-lingual quotation– that is, taking what is said in one language and quoting it in a second language.[6]

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[5] Robin Setton, "A Pragmatic Theory of Simultaneous Interpretation" PhD diss. Graduate Division of English/Applied Linguistics, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997.

[6] Visson, Lynn, "Simultaneous Interpretation: Language and Cultural Difference" pp. 51-64 in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, S. Bermann and M. Wood, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Although simultaneous translation of spoken language may at first seem an inappropriate analog to Bible translation, both tasks share the same paramount goal of producing a precise and accurate translation that is faithful to the *meaning* of the original language. If we consider the Bible in its entirety to be a *primary* speech-act of God originally given in the ancient languages, then the task of Bible translation can be viewed as a *secondary* act of communication, namely quotation. Bible translators are quoting God across linguistic boundaries. Because faithfulness to the original is of paramount importance in Bible translation, the principles and best practices of bi-lingual quotation in simultaneous translation may provide a perspective for considering what might constitute accuracy in the translation of God's word.

Consider for instance, that in the professional practice of simultaneous translation, the translator must so identify his or her translation with the speaker being translated that the translator must use the first-person when speaking in the target language on behalf of the speaker,[7] much as the Bible translator must seek to be invisible to the Bible reader. More importantly, Bible translation is not just the translation of ancient *texts* but, like simultaneous translation, it is a *living* act of communication by which the divine voice speaks into a contemporary moment, collapsing the span of time between the primary and the secondary acts of communication.

Of course, simultaneous interpretation is "live" in a way that the translation of the Bible–or of any written text–is not. The skill set of a simultaneous interpreter is different from that of a translator of written texts because the translator has the luxury of time and can consult lexicons,

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[7] Ibid. 184.

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reference works, and other colleagues. The simultaneous interpreter working orally must make split-second decisions and has no opportunity for editing. Furthermore, a translator of text can employ a larger discourse structure that would have little chance of being recognized in an aural situation.

Another similarity is that, just as the simultaneous interpreter must keep in mind the linguistic and cultural contexts of *both* the speaker and the listener, the Bible translator likewise must understand the linguistic and cultural implications of quoting words between the vastly different cultures of the ancient world and the modern. So while there are obvious differences in practice between the translation of spoken utterances and that of written texts,[8] fidelity to the original source is paramount in both the highly charged setting of international politics and in Bible translation. And the end product–an accurate translation that above all faithfully communicates its source–is the same for both endeavors. Therefore, the principles and techniques of simultaneous interpretation used to produce a highly accurate bi-lingual quotation may provide some perspective on what characterizes accurate Bible translation that is faithful to the original.

So how does a simultaneous interpreter work? And what characterizes an accurate translation? One linguistic study of translation tapes from Russian into English has recently been done by linguist Dr. Lynn Visson,[9] who writes, "Condensation, deliberate omission and addition,

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[8] Bülow-Møller, "Using textlinguistic methodologies for analyzing processing in simultaneous interpretation" pp. 101-12 in *New Directions in Nordic text linguistics and discourse analysis; methodological issues*, W. Vagle and K. Wikberg, eds., (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 2001); Stage, Dorthe, "Comparing Types of Interlingual Transfer," *Perspectives, Studies in Translatology* 10/2 (2002): 119-34.

[9] Dr. Lynn Visson received her Ph.D. from Harvard University, taught Russian language and literature at Columbia University and other American universities, and for more than twenty years was a staff

synecdoche and metonymy, antonymic constructions, grammatical inversion, and the use of semantic equivalents are a few of the tools that help do the job."[10]

A few brief definitions and examples of some of these practices will help clarify. Condensation occurs when the target language captures the thought of a phrase in the source language by using fewer words. For example, according to Visson, the two-word English phrase "space program" accurately translates three long words in Russian.[11] A literal translation of the Russian sentence, "We would like to come to you to your country" can be accurately shortened to "We would like to visit you." Or the translation "This was published in the newspaper the New York Times" could be accurately rendered, "This appeared in the New York Times," where the phrase "the newspaper" would be retained only for audiences who were unacquainted with this specific publication.

Antonymic inversion is when positive statements are changed to negatives and vice versa–usually done because the idiom of the target language requires it. And so the Russian sentence, "You must be silent"–a positive statement that almost sounds like a threat–can be accurately rendered in more natural English by negating it into, "You must not say anything." In Bible translation, antonymic inversion is used to translate the

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interpreter at the United Nations, working from Russian and French into English. See "An Interview with Lynn Visson," American Association of Teachers of Slavic and Eastern European Languages at http://aatseel.org/visson

[10] Visson, Lynn, "Simultaneous Interpretation: Language and Cultural Difference" pp. 51-64 in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, S. Bermann and M. Wood, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 52.

[11] Visson, 52.

double negatives of koine Greek into English because our language does not permit double negatives.

Many claims stated as absolute desiderata in the Bible translation debates among evangelicals would not make sense if the target language were other than English. While anything said in one language can be accurately stated in any other, considerable changes in form might be required because of differences in the structures of the two languages. For instance, Visson points out that "Russian lacks articles and a complex tense system but English does not have aspect, case endings, or the Russian system of prefixation."[12] Simultaneous interpreters must also sometimes use grammatical inversion, where a verb is translated by a noun, a noun by a verb, or an adjective by an adverb. In such cases a translation that preserved the part of speech would so violate the idiom of the target language that it would sound comic. Such differences in the structure of source and target language create enormous translation problems if formal equivalence must be preserved. And the further apart on the linguistic family tree that any two languages are, the less congruence might be expected between their grammatical and syntactical structures, and the more meaningless it would be to speak of formal equivalence in Bible translation as best honoring evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Nothing resembling formal equivalence could be achieved for when the structures of the languages involved have such disparity, which shows how Anglo-centric the evangelical debates have been. And yet we know from Revelation 14:6 that God's word is for "every nation, tribe, language and people." Surely evangelicals must not mandate a

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[12] Visson, 57.

translation philosophy on theological grounds that would exclude, even inadvertently, many of the world's languages.

Logical relationships between propositions must, of course, be diligently preserved in simultaneous interpretation in order to accurately communicate meaning, but they must be communicated by employing the appropriate discourse markers of the target language rather than a strictly "literal" equivalent between conjunctions.

Linguistic studies of other pairs of languages, such as Chinese into English and German into English have also been done to identify those translation principles that produced maximal fidelity to the source language.[13] Those studies have discovered that techniques similar to those employed in the translation of Russian into English were required to maintain accuracy between those languages as well. Of course, study of translation tapes also turned up instances where the simultaneous interpreter failed and produced a translation that did *not* accurately represent the original speaker. Linguists studying those translations discovered that the **failure to communicate accurately the meaning of the source utterance was found in those places where the simultaneous translator rendered the source utterance *too* literally, that is, when preservation of the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic forms of the original statements was given too high a priority in producing the translation.**

All of the techniques discovered in linguistic studies of simultaneous translation that protect the accuracy of the translation involve increasing or decreasing the number of words in the translation as compared to the number of words in the source. Visson found that, "Any

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[13] Robin Setton, "A Pragmatic Theory of Simultaneous Interpretation" Ph.D. diss. Graduate Division of English/Applied Linguistics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997

translation/interpretation from Russian into English will be approximately one-third shorter than a rendering of the same text from English into Russian; this is determined by the structure, grammar and syntax of the two languages."[14] And of course, conversely, that means that translation of English into Russian will consist of about 33% more words in the translation than in the source.

Verbosity: a measure of a translation

No one who has learned a foreign language would dispute that accurate translation between any two languages necessarily involves adding and omitting words. This raises the issue of verbosity in translations. Verbosity is defined as the ratio of the number of words in the translation to the number of words in the corresponding source text. If the measure of verbosity equaled 1, then the number of words in the translation would equal the number of words in its source, resulting in what is called an isomorphic translation. No reasonable person today would insist that an accurate translation that honors our doctrine of Scripture must have exactly the same number of words as its source! Not only is an isomorphic translation NOT the standard of accuracy in translation, but it is also impossible to achieve because of the differences in the grammar and syntactical structures of any two given languages. But there have always been those people who believe that fidelity to one's source text implies a "literal" translation where "literal" is defined as preserving to whatever extent possible elements such as the part of speech, grammatical number, word order, case, and syntactical

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[14] http://aatseel.org/visson

constructions of the source– a definition which consequently moves towards isomorphism as an implied goal of translation technique.

This was certainly the idea behind Aquila's translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Possibly because of his reverence for the Word of God in Hebrew, Aquila believed a Greek translation must faithfully represent the grammar, syntax, and word order of the original, and about AD 140 produced what must be the world's most isomorphic Bible translation ever achieved. Here's a sample of his work in 2 Kings 23:21-24:[15]

<p style="text-align:center">Aquila, LXX/OG, and MT</p>

<p style="text-align:center">3 Reigns (2 Kings) 23:21, 24</p>

v. 21   וַיְצַו הַמֶּלֶךְ **אֶת**־כָּל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר

Aq: καὶ ἐνετείλατο ὁ βασιλεὺς **σὺν** παντὶ τῷ λαῷ τῷ λέγειν   Note συν for ־אֶת

LXX/OG (B): καὶ ἐνετείλατο ὁ βασιλεὺς   παντὶ τῷ λαῷ λέγων

עֲשׂוּ פֶּסַח לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם כַּכָּתוּב

Aq: Ποιήσατε φέσα τῷ   τῷ θεῷ ὑμῶν κατὰ τὸ γεγραμμένον
LXX/OG: Ποιήσατε πάσχα τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ ἡμῶν, καθὼς γέγραπται

עַל סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית הַזֶּה

Aq: ἐπὶ βιβλίου τῆς συνθήκης ταύτης.
LXX/OG: ἐπὶ βιβλίου τῆς διαθήκης ταύτης.

v. 24   וְגַם אֶת־הָאֹבוֹת

Aq: καὶ **καί γε σὺν** τοὺς μάγους   Note: συν + accusative
LXX/OG: καὶ γε   τοὺς θελητὰς

What is the verbosity of these texts?

The MT has 115 words in this passage, where the LXX/OG has 109 words, yielding a verbosity of 0.95. In comparison Aquila's translation is comprised of 114 words, increasing the verbosity to 0.99 (verbosity of 1 = completely isomorphic).

Apparently Aquila thought the LXX left out a few things necessary to accurately represent the Hebrew for his purposes. (You can study this example to see if you agree with him.) So Aquila achieved his goal of making his translation more "literal" than the Septuagint– by creating an even more isomorphic translation.

I suspect that most of us would not feel compelled to translate the Hebrew direct object marker out of respect for God's word, as Aquila did (though perhaps not for that reason). In fact, such an approach to the text implies either a somewhat magical idea of verbal inspiration or the intent to produce something of an interlinear text that is not really for a general readership in the target language. Rather than faithfully communicating the meaning of the Hebrew, Aquila's translation is almost unintelligible at places because of its idiosyncratic sense of fidelity to the Hebrew. Aquila's translation might have been readable by those who knew the Hebrew that lies behind the translation (as we do), but it must have seemed unusual to the point of puzzlement to a native Greek reader with no knowledge of Hebrew syntax. This is a good example of why linguists say that the failure to communicate accurately the meaning of the source happens when the source is translated *too* literally. At the other end of the spectrum, most of us probably do have some intuition that a translation that has too many words compared to its source is adding too much interpretation–but where we

would draw the line? That linguistic study of verbosity when translating Hebrew or Greek into English would be an interesting exercise.

So how do modern English versions of the same passage fare compared to the Septuagint and Aquila?

NRSV = 121 words, verbosity = 1.05

TNIV/NIV =125 words, verbosity = 1.08

NLT = 126 words, verbosity = 1.09

NKJV = 130 words, verbosity = 1.13

NASB = 131 words, verbosity = 1.14

ESV = 131, verbosity = 1.14

The NRSV is the least verbose of these several modern English versions; the ESV, the most.

Now what if we extend our calculation of verbosity to the entire Bible? See the table on the next page.

*The Verbosity of English Versions**

Word count of the Hebrew Masoretic text:[i]   474,316 words

Word count of the Greek New Testament:[ii]   138,167 words

Total: 612,483 words in the original languages

(Word count of Rahlfs LXX,[iii] including apocrypha: 587,467 words)

	# words	# words more in translation:	% larger than original:	verbosity:
original Hebrew & Greek:	612,483	--------	--------	--------
NIV:[iv]	726, 133	113,650	18.56%	1.19
TNIV:[v]	728, 393	115,910	18.92%	1.19
NLT:[vi]	741,276	128,793	21.03%	1.21
NRSV:[vii]	745,481	132,998	21.72%	1.22
ESV:[viii]	757,439	144,956	23.67%	1.24
[LXX:	587,467	113,151	23.86%	0.96]
NKJV:[ix]	770,430	157,947	25.79%	1.26
NASB:[x]	782,815	170,332	27.81%	1.29
ASV:[xi]	784,668	172,185	28.11%	1.28
KJV:[xii]	790, 676	178,193	29.09%	1.29

Notes:
1. Hebrew MT prefixed articles and pronominal suffixes counted as separate words.
2. LXX count includes apocrypha.
3. Apocrypha excluded from NRSV word count.

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* Based on verbosity, i.e., the number of words in the translation compared to the number of words in the Hebrew and Greek texts. Counted using Accordance 6.9.2. (Copyright 2006 Oaktree Software, Inc.). Prepared by Karen H. Jobes, Ph.D. with thanks to Helen Brown of Oaktree Software for information on how Accordance counts words, especially in the Hebrew text. A check of the word counts in Bibleworks yields slightly different counts but the same relative proportions. In Bibleworks, the ESV is 30,344 words larger than the TNIV.

So what's my point? Well, my point is NOT that modern translations should be isomorphic if they are to honor our doctrine of Scripture. Moreover, if that were true, note that the ESV would fall far short on this point. And my point is NOT that the ESV should be thought less faithful to the original language of Scripture than the T/NIV (or vice versa)–though I do find it more than a little ironic that what is advertised as an "essentially literal" translation is the most verbose of several popular English translations–and that the ESV has about 30,000 more words than the TNIV! My point is that the concepts of formal versus functional equivalence, though useful in their day, do not fully do justice to how bilingual quotation works or to what characterizes translations that are faithful to their sources.

Furthermore, the concepts of formal and functional equivalence have been polarized and used to valorize or demonize a given English translation, which has been quite counter-productive for scholarly debate of translation philosophy, to say the least. As the very verbose ESV demonstrates, all good translations must be a mix of both formal and functional equivalence. The fidelity of a translation to the original language cannot be adequately evaluated by pitting formal and functional equivalence against each other. Moreover, the important question of how to honor our doctrine of Scripture when discussing translation theory must not be carried on in an evangelical vacuum apart from the light of linguistics and from an awareness of how Anglo-centric our discussions have been.

There is much about language that is beautifully mysterious, but I close with what I do know for certain about Bible translation. Quoting God from Isa 55:10, 11 he says:

As the rain and the snow
    come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
    without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
    so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for
        the eater,
    so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
    It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
        and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

<div align="right">(TNIV)</div>

Because of this we can rejoice over the marvelous gift of God's authoritative word in all the languages of the world.

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[ii] Greek New Testament (Nestle-Aland, 27th Edition, second printing). The Greek New Testament, edited by Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, Fourth Revised Edition. Copyright © 1966, 1968, 1975 by United Bible Societies, 1983, 1994 by the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001. The GRAMCORD Institute. All rights reserved. Version 3.6

[iii] Septuaginta (Rahlfs Greek Septuagint)
Kraft/Taylor/Wheeler Septuagint Morphology Database v. 3.02
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