How Translation Techniques Aid in Communicating the Bible Cross-culturally

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One Sunday in Vanuatu I preached about how God notices the sparrows that "fall to the ground," regardless of the fact that they're "sold for two pennies," and that "God knows the hairs on our head" (Matt. 10:29-31). I had meant to communicate an encouraging message about how God values and loves us unconditionally. Instead, an elder stood up to summarize my points. "Thank you, missionary," he said, "for showing us that God is watching every bird that we kill, and every sin we commit."

He is keenly aware of every one of our bad deeds, just as he is keenly aware of every hair on our head." Despite the fact that I was preaching in the vernacular, there had obviously been a cultural mismatch which led to the alternate interpretation of my message.

Cross-cultural workers will inevitably have these sorts of mismatches, but what causes them to happen so frequently? How can we bridge the culture and language gap so that we can communicate scripture's intended meaning in the fields where we work?

As a Bible translator, it is part of my daily work to determine the original meaning of scripture and transmit it accurately. However, doing this is often a daunting task. The parables and logical arguments in Paul's epistles are especially difficult to exegete and express in Majority World cultures. While difficult, the task is not hopeless. Over the years, Bible translators have refined a number of tools to achieve this objective. I have discovered that the same tools translators use can make every cross-cultural worker better equipped to communicate the message of scripture.

Below are seven common "tools of the trade" Bible translators utilize to get the meaning across accurately and clearly. I'll briefly describe these techniques, and show how they can be employed by anyone who works cross-culturally in an effort to transmit the Bible's intended meaning accurately and clearly.

1. Make implicit information explicit. Some things "go without saying." This was as true in Greece at the time the New Testament was written as it is today. Unfortunately, what "goes without saying" in English differs from what "went without saying" two thousand years ago in the Ancient Near East, as well as what "goes without saying" in contemporary mission fields.

Bible translators refer to the non-spoken cultural cues in the Bible as implicit information—things every­one would have understood at the time, so they were not necessary to write down. For instance, if I told my children, "It's Sunday; put on your best clothes," then they would know implicitly that I meant, "We're going to church, and you want to look your best because it shows respect to God."

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ing people from sins? Why not name him Thomas, “because he will save his people from their sins”? First-century readers knew implicitly that Yeshua means “God saves.” However, most Bible translations do not make this information clear in the text.

We cannot take it for granted that people in other cultures will make the connection; we should explain what was implied so people can put the pieces together, making scripture even more meaningful. When cross-cultural communicators make this sort of implicit information clear to their audiences, the passage takes on deeper meaning (see Dehler 2008).

2. Doubles do matter, and they’re important. Hebrew poetry often says the same thing two different ways. For instance, Proverbs speaks of your father’s commands and your mother’s teaching (Prov. 6:20). Since the authors of the New Testament were influenced by Hebrew style, they also used “doubles.” Sometimes these doubles were repeated words (like “Amen, Amen!” or “Lord, Lord!”), or synonyms such as “diseases and infirmities” (Matt. 9:35). Such a linguistic technique added color to the message in Hebrew and Greek, but nowadays it presents a challenge for cross-cultural communication.

We have found that people in our host culture read “Moses! Moses!” with little enthusiasm—not realizing that God addressing Moses in such a way underscored the intensity of the communication. Since the translation of Exodus 3:4 simply reads “Moses! Moses!” in the lingua franca, we do well to explain, “God shouted out Moses’ name twice to get his attention.”

It is important to discern what the purpose of the doublet was in order to communicate the right meaning. For example, the doublet in Romans 1:18 is “ungodliness and wickedness.” True, there is a slight difference between the two words, and word studies can make for good preaching material. However, it is not always wise to focus on the different nuances of doublets.

Typically, the doublets have nearly the same meaning, which serves to emphasize a single point, rather than to make two different points. For instance, if I said to my friend, “That man is reliable and loyal,” I don’t want him to dwell on why I was making a distinction between reliability and loyalty. I mean for him to understand that this man is definitely going to stick by me!

Similarly, Paul wasn’t distinguishing between “ungodliness and wickedness”; rather, he was saying the same thing in two different ways in order to add punch to his point.

If we understand the purpose of the doublet, we can communicate the meaning in cultures where doublets are not used. Bruce Moore (1993) compiled a list of 654 doublets in the New Testament. Some are synonymous or nearly synonymous (e.g., Eph. 2:19, “strangers and aliens”; or Matt. 5:12, “to rejoice and be glad”); some are generic-specific (e.g., Mark 2:25, “he was in need and hungry”); some are positive-negative (e.g., James 1:4, “complete, lacking in nothing”); some are active-passive (e.g., 2 Cor. 12:4, “which cannot be told, which a human being must not utter”).

Synonymous doublets serve to emphasize a point, not to make two separate ones. Positive-negative doublets emphasize a contrast; active-passive doublets are more poetic. When we recognize the type of doublet, and determine how it helps prove the author’s point, the passage comes alive in a new way.

3. Does the audience understand rhetorical questions? Anyone who works cross-culturally has discovered that questions are used differently in each culture. Try asking people from various cultures about their age, weight, or how much money they make, and you’ll observe culturally-conditioned reactions. Westerners typically think of questions as a way of gathering information, but questions are used in many cultures to make a point, politely decline, or even accuse.

In addition to “straight-forward” questions, the Bible contains hundreds of rhetorical questions. And their meaning is not always evident, especially in cultures where questions are used differently from the usage in Jesus’ day. When Philip told Nathaniel about Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel said, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). Somehow, English speakers know this isn’t really a question, but a note of disapproval.

But does our audience recognize this? In order to communicate this verse well, we need to explain, “What Nathaniel meant was that nobody of significance could possibly come from an insignificant village like Nazareth.” To offer another example, when I read, “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” (Matt. 13:55), people in my host culture took it as a straightforward question, so I explained that the question was actually a criticism meaning, “He’s of lowly birth; he’s just the son of a carpenter.”

An experiment can help determine how people interpret the questions in scripture. Take a list of a dozen questions from the Bible. Mix up “real” questions and rhetorical ones, and ask the people what the proper response should be for each of these.

Rhetorical questions include:
- Proverbs 8:1-2
- Matthew 3:7
- Mark 1:24
- Luke 1:18
- John 1:46
- Acts 1:11
- Romans 2:3
- 1 Corinthians 1:13
- 2 Corinthians 1:17

"Real" questions include:
- Genesis 3:9
- Matthew 22:42
- Mark 15:2
- Luke 7:19
- John 8:22
- Acts 7:1

Working out the meanings of questions will make scripture more powerful to our audiences.

4. Passives are caused by whom? The Bible is full of passive clauses. Passives are verb phrases which have no specified agent. For example, in Acts 16:31 (“All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved”) it is clear that God is the one saving all who call on the name of the Lord.

However, in some passive con-
structions, the agent is more difficult to figure out, especially for audiences that do not use passive constructions regularly. Here, it becomes essential to communicate who the agent is. For example, in Matthew 1:18, we read that Mary was "found to be with child." Our reading communities might wonder, who found her to be pregnant? Just Joseph and Mary? The whole town? It is important to recognize passive constructions in scripture and communicate who those agents are as we speak cross-culturally.

5. Metaphors are Rubik's Cubes. Everybody loves to solve a puzzle, but you need to know what the designer had in mind before you can solve it. I never knew how many metaphors there were in the Bible until I began translating. Consider these:
   - Don't be hard-hearted or double-minded.
   - Some have shipwrecked their faith.
   - Jesus is the road.
   - Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected.
   - Take the plank from your eye.
   - The Pharisees' teaching is yeast.
   - The New Testament employs more than one thousand metaphors. Some are far easier for those of us in Western cultures to understand than others. I have found that passages containing metaphors are the most likely to be unclear in our host culture.

   For instance, when I asked what Jesus meant when he said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62), I saw only puzzled faces. One man reckoned this was literally about someone who gardens in an ignorant manner, rather than about following Jesus wholeheartedly.

   Another example is in Galatians 4:1, where Paul talks about inheri-
   tances: "What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no
der different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate." People in
our host culture assumed Paul was literally giving instructions about inheri-
tances, whereas the passage is actually about the people of God receiv-
ing a new promise from God after the death of Jesus.

   The use of so many unfamiliar metaphors is one of the main rea-
sons people from Majority World cultures find the Bible hard to un-
derstand. Taking a moment to explain them can help them better appreciate
the Bible. The rule of thumb is: always clarify the parallel between the
metaphor and the actual point the author was making.

6. Decide when a passage is literal or allegorical. Many Majority
World cultures consider large portions of scripture to be entirely alle-
gorical, whereas Western audiences take these passages literally.

   For instance, when we were checking the translation of Genesis
1, an elderly man insisted, "No, you have the order wrong. First there
was light, then darkness, not the other way around. Because first everything
was good, then people sinned and ruined the world." To him, the cre-
ation of light and darkness was not about origins; instead, light and
darkness were allegories of good and evil. This "pre-understanding" (Car-
sen 1985) of allegory affects many communities' reading of the entire
metanarrative in scripture.

   One SIL fieldworker told me that one day, after years of translating
the New Testament, his national co-worker suddenly burst out in a fit of
laughter. When he finally contained himself, he said, "You mean this all
really happened on earth? I thought it was all an allegory about events
that happened in heaven!" Often, when we engage in cross-cultural in-
terpretation of the Bible, we discover that our audience understands the
passage differently than we do.

   Interestingly, the allegorical reading of scripture was common for
the authors of the New Testament and the early church fathers. According

   to Kenneth Schenck, "Early Christians typically read the Old Testa-
ment with 'spiritual' rather than historical glasses; that is, they looked
for deeper meanings in the words than what these words meant in con-
text" (2003, 355). Even the author of Hebrews re-interpreted historical
Old Testament passages about the tabernacle, temple, sacrifice, and
Sabbath as allegories.

   English speakers can usually pick up on the subtle nuances at the
discourse level which show when a text is allegorical or literal. How-
ever, non-native speakers of English are not likely to detect these clues.
Unless their vernacular translations clearly indicate at the discourse level
when a text is allegorical, it is up to the biblical interpreter to indicate
so. Here, the cross-cultural process can be enlightening in both direc-
tions: Majority World audiences will usually draw out allegorical mean-
ings, and westerners will be the ones
to insist on literal interpretations.

7. Explain key terms, rather than taking them for granted.
Church leaders frequently speak a "Christianese" that people who are
new to the church don't understand. For instance, we speak of the glory of
God, but what does it really mean? In the Old Testament, "glory" was
a bright light that surrounded God, indicating his supremacy and holiness.
Even "forgive" is a difficult term for us to understand, as Peter showed
when he asked Jesus what he really meant by forgiveness.

   Bible translators speak of these "Christianese" words as "key terms.
Key terms include mundane ideas such as "temple" or "Sanhedrin," as
well as fundamental concepts such as "resurrection" and "sanctification.
We should not take for granted that people understand these terms; it
should be a lifelong habit to explain key terms when we communicate in
cultures that do not have temples, a Sanhedrin, or the theological tenets
of resurrection and sanctification. I keep a file of these key terms and
consult it regularly. Congregations will have a more profound under-
standing of the Bible if church leaders regularly remind them of the
meaning of these terms.

Conclusion

   By employing Bible translation methods I use as a translator, I have
received a richer (and more accurate) understanding of what Bible pas-
sages mean, which in turn helps me to communicate the meaning clearly
and accurately cross-culturally. It's fulfilling to see satisfied responses from
people as they put pieces together and catch the meaning of God's word. This is, after all, one of our highest goals as cross-cultural workers.

These seven "tools of the trade" are by no means a comprehensive list of things Bible translators employ in translation. We also mark for genre, deconstruct genitives, track reason-result propositions, "front" prominent information, control "information load," and focus on participant referencing. Here I've tried only to cover some major tools and am confident that if workers master these, they will be better equipped to correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15) and be agents for transmitting that message cross-culturally.

References

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