

The Bible and Translation
USC Academic Bible Study
Links to resources: jlharmon.com/usc-abs

Week 1: How? How does translation work in general? How is Bible translation different/the same?

Week 2: Which? Which translation should I choose? Which translation is best for my specific purpose?

Different purposes

- What are some contexts in which we read the Bible?
- Do we always read the Bible in the same way? What are some differences in the ways we engage with the text?

Different Translations

Number one thing to remember: *all translations have pros and cons and are useful for certain purposes.*

Translations can be put on a spectrum from “word-for word” to “paraphrase”:

A strictly **word-for-word** translation is almost useless as a translation because the meaning is not clear in English. But it can be used to look at the original language texts. Most “**literal**” or “**formal equivalence**” translations lean this direction, but make the text grammatical in English.

A **dynamic equivalence** translation attempts to make the translation clear and idiomatic, translating the “thought” behind the original text. The full interpretation of the text, however, is left up to the reader. Many modern translations attempt this.

A **paraphrase** turns out to be more like a commentary, with all of the interpretation of the text left to the translator. They are easy to understand, but you have to trust the cultural and theological lens of the translator (not always bad!).

Overview of some English Bible translations

KJV (1611): The culmination of a couple centuries of political and religious reform (Wyclif, Tyndale). Even if you’ve never read the Bible, you are familiar with certain phrases just based on its ubiquity in English literature and culture.

Pros: Alluded to everywhere in literature. Defined what the English language should be much like Shakespeare. Many idioms came into English based on this (and Tyndale’s) translation.

Cons: Over 400 years old. English has changed quite a bit since it was translated. We have a better understanding of ancient Hebrew and Greek now. The KJV only used the Masoretic text and Received Text manuscripts; we have more and older copies of scripture now.

(British revised version in 1885, American revision (ASV) in 1901)

RSV (1952): first serious challenger to KJV’s dominance. Two modern daughter translations: NRSV and ESV.

Good News Bible (1976): First Bible using the translation theory of “dynamic equivalence” (thought-for-thought).

Pros: Popular among second-language English speakers. Easy to understand. Minimal theological bias.
Cons: Older translation, some language/theology is dated. Perhaps too much of a paraphrase.

NIV (1978): The most popular English Bible, the culmination of the “dynamical equivalence” theory.
Pros: Clear, readable modern language. Sounds like modern literature (not stilted or old fashioned). Very widespread, thus familiar to many. Has been revised recently (2011)
Cons: Somewhat of an Evangelical bias. “Dynamic equivalence” translation forces translators to make some interpretive decisions to make understandable English.

NRSV (1989): The standard academic Bible. Used in many progressive churches.
Pros: Fairly literal, accurate rendering into modern English. Uses best manuscripts. Used by academics in a wide variety of traditions.
Cons: Academic language is not easy to just pick up and understand. Theological bias leans progressive/mainline (maybe this is a pro...)

NLT (1996): A popular modern English version that leans towards paraphrase (revised 2004)
Pros: Very understandable. Easy to read. Natural-sounding English. Uses emotional language to evoke feelings that the original text would have.
Cons: Textual interpretation is done for you by evangelical-leaning translators. Text is oversimplified in some places where the original is hard to understand.

ESV (2001): Pushback against dynamic equivalence. Current favorite among Conservative Evangelicals.
Pros: Word-for-word translation theory gives you the feeling of looking into the original languages. Puzzling out an interpretation of the text is left up to the reader.
Cons: Definite Evangelical theological bias. Word-for-word translation makes text less understandable at first glance.

The Message (2002): The most popular “paraphrase” version.
Pros: Understandable. Current, idiomatic English. Doesn’t necessarily use “Biblese” idioms.
Cons: Much of the interpretation of scripture is done for you. Doesn’t sound as “serious” as we like to take the Bible sometimes.

NET (2005):
Pros: Understandable modern English. Strikes a balance between keeping the Greek/Hebrew text at the forefront and being idiomatic. Tons of footnotes from the translators.
Cons: Academic tinge to language takes some work to read. To get the full picture of the text, you have to read the footnotes. Conservative Evangelical bias in the text itself, even if the notes soften that.

Questions to ask when choosing a translation:

- What is my purpose in reading the Bible at this particular time?
- What audience did the translator have in mind? Am I that audience?
- What biases might be present, and how can I spot them?

Translation comparison

2 Corinthians 5:17:

Greek

hōste *ei* *tis* *en* *Christō* *kainē* *ktisis* *ta* *archaia*
Therefore if anyone in Christ new creation the old things

parēlthen *idou* *gegonen* *kaina*
have passed away behold has emerged new

KJV

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

NRSV

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

ESV

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

NIV

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

NET

So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come!

NLT

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

Message

Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it!

Questions

- What is the same from translation to translation?
- What is different?
- What would happen if you only read the most “word-for-word” translation?
- What would happen if you only used the most “paraphrased” translation?