

Analyzing and Utilizing Receptor Language Proverb Forms in Translation

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1. Introduction

Proverbs have been translated and borrowed between language and cultures for millennia. Even the ancient Latin proverb *Asinus ad lyram* ‘A donkey with a lyre’, meaning “something futile”, can be traced back to a Sumerian source, more than 2,000 before the Romans (Taylor 1996). But translating proverbs well is never easy.

Translating proverbs is unusually complex: exegeting proverbs is challenging and then finding or creating appropriate artistic forms in the receptor language is a special problem. Proverbs are often the shortest poems in a language, so translators who translate proverbs should think of their task as translating poetry.

Unlike most narrative and hortatory passages, in proverbs the form of a proverb is an integral part of the meaning. If the hearer/reader does not understand and feel that a passage is a proverb, they will miss some of the meaning. This indissoluble link between form and meaning in proverbs prompted Williams to title his article on Biblical proverbs “The Power of Form” (1980).

Often Bible translators find themselves telling people “Meaning is more important than form.” But with proverbs, *the form is part of the meaning*; that is, to try to translate the “meaning” of a proverb without translating into the form of a proverb is to translate only part of the meaning of a proverb. For proverbs, the form is part of the meaning.

This paper is not about the study of the use of proverbs in the discourse structure of the source language or the RL (Receptor Language). Nor does this paper address who uses proverbs with whom, and in what context. Nor is this about how to exegete proverbs. My goal here is to simply present some specific ideas on how to explore the structure of RL proverbs in preparation for translating proverbs into the RL, then give some proposals for application of the findings in a given language. Several earlier authors have advocated utilizing RL proverb forms, including Hatton (1976), Salisbury (1994), Schneider (1994), Wendland (2002) but this paper aims to develop this approach in more detail. In doing so, I lay out a more systematic method by which to do this.

To prepare for translating Biblical proverbs, I suggest a three-phase plan. These same steps can be usefully applied by translators who are mother tongue translators and also those who are working in some capacity with languages which are not their mother tongues.

1. Collect a number of proverbs in the RL (200 is not too many)
2. Analyze the techniques used by the RL in forming these proverbs
3. Practice deliberately applying these techniques in translating non-Biblical proverbs, then later Biblical proverbs.

The first step is not complicated, and can be quite enjoyable, whether performed by a native speaker or an outsider. Even the very act of collecting proverbs can be useful for multiple reasons and the resulting collection is of interest to a variety of people (Unseth in press).

The second step, analyzing the RL techniques used in forming proverbs, requires an open, curious mind. The study of proverbs around the world has shown that there is a set of artistic devices that are commonly used in most languages, including rhyme, alliteration, meter, assonance. This paper presents an expanded list of possibilities, but investigators will have to be alert for other possibilities in the language they are studying.

The third step is the more challenging, casting the meaning of the source language proverb into a form in the RL that uses some of the RL's typical proverb structures. To demonstrate the application of RL proverbial forms in translation, examples of proverbs translated into English will be given, comparing translations that have tried to apply proverbial techniques and some that do not. Those that follow such an approach generally increase the aesthetic effect, and thereby the impact of the proverb. My non-systematic study of English translations suggests that the translations by Knox and Moffatt show more sensitivity to this approach than most others.

Some may think that they do not yet need to study RL proverbs, assuming that proverbs are found only in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. However, they are found in various books of the Old and New Testament, e.g. 1 Sam. 24:13, Ez. 16:44, Lk. 4:23, John 4:37, 2Pt. 2:22.

2.0 Analyzing techniques used in forming proverbs

After a large number of RL proverbs are collected, the techniques used by the language in forming these proverbs should be analyzed. The proverbs might be analyzed by those outside of the core translation team, such as teachers, church leaders, literature scholars, etc.

Languages around the world each have their own patterns that they use in forming proverbs. However, many languages will draw heavily from a common list of techniques, in addition to some features that may be unique. The two major categories of techniques used in forming proverbs are those that rely on sound and those that rely on structure. Of course, many proverbs will utilize more than one technique, and often from both of these two major categories. In some languages, rhyme and alliteration may be standard. In some languages, the great majority of proverbs are grammatically built on a couplet structure. Each language will have its own preferences and tendencies in these matters.

Proverbs should also be analyzed for how much information they include or withhold. In many languages, one of the hallmarks of a proverb is that it makes the listener (or reader) stop and ponder the meaning, rather than clarifying all of the symbolism and multiple senses of words.

2.1 Techniques based on sound

Proverbs differ from other more prosaic forms of speech in that they are fixed forms, the words being invariant, (more or less). Part of what makes these proverbs

easier to remember is their sound, often a pleasing or memorable combination of sounds. Commonly used techniques for using sounds aesthetically in proverbs include rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and meter.

Rhyme: Proverbs in many languages will employ some use of rhyme. This rhyme may occur at the ends of natural phrase breaks, or at multiple points in a proverb.

Alliteration: Alliteration is a pattern in which the same consonants are repeated, though the vowels may differ. Many languages use alliteration in proverbs.

Alliteration does not always involve totally identical consonants. If not identical, consonants may be similar, what phonologists call members of a “natural class”. For example, the consonants *m*, *n*, *ñ* and *ŋ* are all nasal consonants; a proverb that used a high proportion of these nasal consonants would sound more alliterative, which in many languages would be considered aesthetically preferable. Some other natural classes of consonants include labial sounds (*m*, *b*, *v*, *p*, *f*), sibilants (*s*, *z*, *sh*, *ch*, etc.), and ejective stops (*p'*, *t'*, *k'*). Alliteration can be amply seen in the following Amharic example, where labial consonants are repeated:

zəmm̐ balä af, zəmb̐ aygäbabbätəm̐ “The mouth that is silent, no fly enters it.”

Assonance: Assonance is a pattern in which the same vowel is repeated, though the consonants may differ. Note the Amharic example: *yälämmänä mänämmänä* “The one who begs grows thin.” (There is also alliteration and rhyme, as well, making it very euphonious (by Amharic standards).

An extreme example of assonance in a proverb can be seen in the following Oromo proverb from Ethiopia:

kan mana baala, a?laa gaala

in house leaf, out camel

‘He is (only) a leaf at home, but (big as) a camel elsewhere.’

The proverb uses the word *baala* ‘leaf’, to indicate that the person is small and insignificant, and *gaala* ‘camel’ to indicate that a person is large and important. The proverb could just as logically have used the word ‘pebble’, ‘bean’, or ‘gnat’, but the word ‘leaf’ *baala* was chosen because it contains only the vowel *a*, making the vowels of the proverb completely assonant and much more memorable. A similar proverb exists in Arabic, but using different nouns. The Oromo translator of this proverb deliberately and artistically chose “leaf” and “camel” to achieve complete assonance, changing the nouns while preserving the point of the proverb.

Assonance may be artistic even if it is not complete. As with alliteration, a proverb may have partial assonance by use of similar vowels, vowels forming a natural class, such as back, round vowels *u* and *o*. Again, the use of even approximate assonance may be judged to be more aesthetically pleasing. This can be seen in the Kyrgyz version of Prov. 23:20, below, where the vowels *a* and *o* predominate (vowels and consonants in this transcription are not meant to be phonetically precise). Note that both lines begin with two examples of *a*, then have a final word with *o* (and a final rhyming *-un*).

araketch tamaq soolordun *arasinda bolbogun.*

a a *a a oo o u* *a a* *a o o u*

Meter: Many proverbs have a pattern of meter or rhythm, often based on stress patterns, e.g. iambic, trochaic. If a proverb has two or more lines, these lines may have not only matching stress patterns, but also matching numbers of syllables in each line. In English, this can be seen in the iambic proverb

“The BIGger they ARE,
the HARDer they FALL.”

Tone: Languages that use tone can also use tonal patterns artfully to enhance the poetic beauty of proverbs. This might take the form of a couplet with identical tones, e.g. HHLHL, HHLHL. Tone can also be used in more complicated ways, such as HLL, LLH. (I regret that I have no actual examples, but I have heard of tone being used in this way.)

Combinations of these techniques:

Combinations of several patterns of artistry help make a proverb memorable and keep it current in a language. When several of these sound-based techniques are combined in the same proverb, it becomes more memorable and more aesthetically valued.

2.2 Techniques based on grammatical structures

Many proverbs are based on patterns not so much sound based as grammatically based. (Of course, proverbs that are based on grammatical structures can employ sounds artistically, as well.) A language’s repertoire of grammatical patterns used in proverbs may be very limited, or may be very broad. Grammatical patterns use in proverbs may include parallelisms (several kinds), rhetorical questions, imperatives (positive and negative), *if-then* sentences, quotations, questions and answers, etc.

Parallelisms:

There are a number of different kinds of parallelisms, so it is important to note what kinds of parallelisms are used. It may be that a language never uses one of the types of parallelism that is common in Proverbs, such as synonymous parallelism.

In studying parallelisms, it is important to note what kind of conjunctions are used, many languages omitting overt conjunctions in the desire to make proverbs dense. For example, note the lack of a conjunction between the two elements in the following Amharic proverb:

“A word from the mouth spoken, an egg from the hand broken.”

Many Amharic proverbs built on a parallelism have no conjunction overtly marking the logical relation between the two elements. It is up to the listener/reader to discern the logical link between the two clauses.

One must also note which element of a parallelism comes first, e.g. the positive or negative, the reason or the imperative, the topic or the comment. Where one element of a parallelism is a statement about a topic and the other is the application based on the first, it is important to note which element comes first. For example, note the following Amharic proverb: “Burglarizing with a cough, praying with a grudge.” The point of the proverb is to remind people about how to pray, not about how to steal. In Amharic, the

two elements of a parallelism are generally in this order, the “point” of the proverb coming last.

Comparison parallelisms: (2 parts or even 3 parts)

“The one who asks finds,
the one who trades profits.” (Amharic)

Contrasting parallelisms:

“A lie may help a person pass the day well,
but not the night.” (Oromo)

Contrasting parallel imperatives:

“Drink the bitter medicine,
but rub butter on your teeth.” (Oromo)

Questions and answers:

“What does a blind person need? Light.
What does a sick person need? Healing.” (Amharic)

Rhetorical question

“Who can remove meat from the jaws of a lion?” (Amharic)

“Whose fault is it that the chicken doesn’t have teeth?” (Isthmus Zapotec)

Quotations:

“ ‘The ground is nice, too,’ said the old woman, falling off her horse. “ (Oromo)

The analysts should note whether proverbs use direct speech, indirect speech, or both.

Positive imperative

“Drink the bitter medicine, but rub butter on your teeth.” (Oromo)

“You yourself plant it and see!” (Oromo)

Negative imperative (also a parallelism)

“Don't reject all the criticism,
don't accept all the praise.” (Oromo)

Reason-imperative

“There are worse, don't divorce your wife!” (Amharic)

“Don’t yearn for old age, because you get it for free.” (Texmelucan Zapotec)

Note that in these two languages, the order of the reason and the imperative is opposite.

Doubtless there are more categories of grammatical structures than I have listed here, and certainly there could be more subcategories under “parallelism”. However, these categories serve to adequately illustrate the point.

Non-canonical grammar

Many proverbs are found to be not fully “grammatical” in some way. Sometimes affixes are omitted to reduce the number of syllables in order to match the metrical

pattern of the other half of a couplet. For example, note the rhymes at the ends of the two lines in the following Ethiopian proverb ‘I have a cow in heaven, but I haven’t seen her milk’:

lam alläñ bäsämay
wätätwanəm alay

This rhyme is only achieved by omitting the usual negative suffix from the verb at the end of the second line, in addition to omitting words such as *gən* ‘but’. An Ethiopian linguist friend of mine once demonstrated how awkward sounding the second line of this proverb becomes if it obeys the usual rules of grammar, producing the unpoetic but grammatically canonical form *wätätwanəm gən gäna ayäcce aläwk’əm*. Similarly, some affixes were omitted for the sake of meter in a poetic version of the Gospels in Swahili (Noss and Renju 2003).

Other ways of bending the grammar include altering word order, such as fronting a locative ahead of an object to rhyme the end of a phrase. Conjunctions are often omitted and sometimes only dependent verb forms were used. One of the motivations for these non-canonical grammatical forms is to shorten the proverb, part of whose impact is derived from its very terseness, such as the one already cited above. Also, grammar is sometimes bent to achieve a certain meter.

Personification

In proverbs, it may be possible for inanimate objects and animals to speak. This can be seen in the Oromo proverb “ ‘As you pick me, do you have water prepared?’ asked the (bitter) *ogondin* fruit?”

Of course, it is possible, even likely, that a good proverb will contain more than one of these elements of grammatical structure. In addition, proverbs that have grammatically-based artistry often incorporate sound-based artistry as well.

2.3 Techniques based on images and words (rather than sound or grammar)

Having said all this, however, many proverbs are very much like normal forms of speech, the art of these proverbs being expressed more in picturesque, humorous, or striking images and words, not so much in the sounds or grammatical patterns, e.g. Amharic “Rearranging the rocks under a pot does not improve the flavor of the stew”, “The python’s den is measured with the cubit of a fool”, “The baboon, without knowing that her own bottom is also bald, laughs at her companion”.

In these, and many other examples, there is no discernible phonological or grammatical art. In such proverbs, the “art” is often in the figure, the striking juxtaposition of elements, the clever use of metaphor and symbolism, the concealing and discovering of the meaning and application in the proverb. For example, the proverb about the rocks under a pot is used to say that slight or merely surface changes will not solve a problem. The listener must understand that the “rocks” are not strictly literal, and make the analogy.

Stereotypes

Every culture has its own proverbial or stereotypical characters, often using animals symbolically in proverbs (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 1999). For example, in Ethiopian Amhara culture, the lion is seen to be strong, a leader, generally a positive symbol. Hyenas, by contrast, are understood to be unclean and always negative. Donkeys are assumed to be frequently flatulent. In Finland, dogs are stereotypically unreliable while the mouse and the partridge symbolize smallness and insignificance in proverbs (Kuusi 1998a). In these languages, there are many proverbs that are based on these stereotypes.

If a Biblical proverb uses an animal or image in a context that clashes with a cultural stereotype, a literal translation may distort the meaning totally. For example, Proverbs 30:25-31 mentions “ants”, “hyraxes” (or “badgers” or “coney”), “locusts”, a “lizard”, “lion”, “rooster”, and “male goat”. If any of these have cultural stereotypes that would seriously clash with the symbolism intended in the original proverb, then translators will have to seriously investigate native speakers' reactions and consider several options, not just blithely translate literally.

Motifs

In addition to the grammatically based structures listed above, languages that use proverbs will often have a number of proverb that follow a general pattern or motif. For example, there may be set patterns such as “Better X than Y”, or “X is the mother of Y”.

Introductory formulas

Some languages have one or more formulaic introductions for proverbs. Schneider gives standard Tsonga examples of these, including “Those of old have spoken and said...” and “There is a proverb which says...” (1986:132). Spanish proverbs are often introduced with the phrase “*El que nace [para]...*” (Arora 1998). Though such lengthy introductions would be inappropriate to repeat in the book of Proverbs, one could very well be appropriate when a single proverb is used conversationally in Scripture. For example, 1 Sam. 24:13 is translated by the RSV as “As the proverb of the ancients says...,” which could easily be rephrased to fit a standard Tsonga proverbial introduction.

Being alert for undiscovered possibilities

In studying local proverbs, we should be alert for linguistic features that we have not noted or understood before. For example, Hall reported some verb tenses that had not been noted previously were discovered in proverbs (1953:28). Similarly, in studying Pendau riddles (likewise, a specialized genre), Quick came to understand a special copula that he had hardly ever noted before (2003).

3. Application

Collecting proverbs is often pleasant; analyzing them presents some challenges; but consciously applying the results of RL techniques in translation is more difficult.

Conscious use of RL proverbial patterns is greatly assisted by access to an analyzed collection of proverbs, even for native speakers of the RL. The list of RL proverb techniques would then serve as a source of ideas and suggestions on matters of

form as the translators translated proverbs into that language. Translators of poetic passages should be “alert for ways to build poetic language back into [their] translation” (Peacock 1981:1).

Translating a few proverbs will quickly show translators that this is a different genre than narrative! Before translating Biblical proverbs, it seems to me preferable to practice translating other non-Biblical proverbs. When translating non-Biblical proverbs, translators may feel less constrained by the usual tendency to unthinkingly and mechanically transfer the Source Language form into the RL.

There are a brilliant examples of translators structuring a proverb in the RL using a different technique, even changing the some details of the SL form, all for the sake of the RL art. For example, compare the German and Finnish forms of a proverb below, the Finnish having been borrowed from the German (Kuusi 1998b):

Führe ein Schwein bis an der Rhein, es bleibt ein Schwein. “Take a pig to the Rhine, he comes back a pig.”

Vie sika Saksaan, tuo sika Saksasta, sika sika sittenkin on “Take a pig to Germany, bring a pig back from Germany, a pig is still a pig.”

The German form refers to the *Rhein* River, achieving a rhyme. The Finnish form refers to Germany (*Saksa*) instead, setting up repetition of *s*, *i*, *a*, and *k*. Kuusi observes, “If it were a question of an academic test of German translation, the examiners would no doubt consider such freedom of interpretation a punishable offence. The anonymous translator was, nevertheless, right” (1998b).

In translating proverbs, there is no general requirement for the translator to preserve the particular technique or rhetorical device used in the SL (Source Language) when translating into the RL. Rather, it is more important to seek an appropriate aesthetic technique in the RL, (while striving to keep the meaning, of course). A proverb that is highly alliterative in the SL may very well be translated into a form that uses rhyme in the RL. In such a case, the translator is preserving the meaning and artistic form, but not using the same artistic form as in the SL. Not surprisingly it is easier to approximate the SL grammatical form of a proverb in the RL than it is to preserve any particular sound-based artistic form in the RL.

The sound-based aesthetics would be the hardest to convey into another language, the grammatical techniques less so, and the image based ones would be the easiest to translate (though one still has to cope with the usual types of translation problems, such as the fact that there may be no snow or goats known in some areas, etc.)

Proverbs based on images rather than parallelisms (such as the ones cited above about the rocks under the pot or the bald-bottomed baboon), may be less daunting to translate, but a translator should still look for opportunities to render even these into artistic forms appropriate for proverbs in the RL. That is, in a language that likes alliteration in proverbs, if a non-alliterative proverb from the source language, (such as the ones just cited), could be translated into the RL in an alliterative form, that would seem preferable to a non-alliterative form. As a poor example, the proverb cited above about the baboon might be alliteratively translated into English as “The bald-bottomed baboon blindly belittles her buddy.”

3.1 Sound based techniques

A study of English proverbs quickly shows a set of sound-based aesthetic techniques for forming proverbs. These include the usual techniques of rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and meter. The deliberate application of these in translating Biblical proverbs into English is shown below. Hopefully you will agree that (at least some of) these restructured proverbs are aesthetically preferable to the form in the RSV.

3.1.1 Alliteration

A deliberate effort to use alliteration produced a more aesthetic form of Proverbs 19:7. Compare the first form that follows the SL structure unimaginatively, and then my alliterative form, below:

Prov. 19:7	“All of a poor man’s brothers hate him, how much more do his friends go far from him.”	RSV
	“A poor person’s family forsake him, his friends flee farther.”	PEU

Alliteration may be strictly word initial, or word internal and final. Note the sibilants (*s* and *sh*) in Williams’s translation of the following proverb:

Prov. 10:5	“A <u>s</u> ensible <u>s</u> on makes <u>s</u> hay while the <u>s</u> un <u>s</u> hines, a <u>s</u> hameful <u>s</u> on <u>s</u> leeps in the hay through harvest.”	Williams
	“A son who gathers in summer is prudent, but a son who sleeps in harvest brings shame.”	RSV

Below are more alliterative proverbs..

Prov. 11:4	“Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.”	NIV
	“Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.”	RSV
Prv. 12:11a	“Till field and fill belly”	Knox
	“He who tills his land will have plenty of bread”	RSV
Prov. 11:8	“The righteous are delivered from trouble, the wicked dive into trouble.” (or “delve”?)	PEU
	“The righteous is delivered from trouble, and the wicked gets into it, instead.”	RSV
Prov. 17:1	“Better a crust with quiet, than a feast with a feud.” or “than a house full of feasting with feuding.”	PEU
	“Better is a dry morsel with quiet, than a house full of feasting with strife.”	RSV

In the alternatives for Prov. 15:17, note how the first and third alternatives each have more than one set of consonants being repeated in the same verse.

Prov. 15:17 alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Greens with gladness beats beef with bitterness.” • “Peas with peace beats battles with beef.” • “Better beans with loving than beef with loathing.” 	PEU
	“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is,	RSV

	than a fattened ox and hatred with it.”	
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Alliteration may run through the whole proverb (as in Prov. 19:7 & 10:5) above, or there may be separate spans of alliteration in each half of a parallelism, as in 28:6, below. Note also that the first line has two consonants being repeated, both *p* and (less prominently) *r*.

Prov. 28:6	“ <u>P</u> referable a <u>p</u> oor <u>p</u> erson on <u>p</u> ure <u>p</u> ath, than a <u>w</u> ealthy <u>o</u> ne <u>w</u> ith <u>w</u> icked <u>w</u> ays.”	PEU
	“Better is a poor man who walks in integrity than a rich man who is perverse in his ways.”	RSV

Though some alliteration may be pleasing, too much can form tongue twisters.

3.1.2 Rhyme

The use of rhyme is common in English proverbs, such as “Birds of a feather flock together” and “Haste makes waste.” Even if the rhyme is not exact, it can still be effective, as in “A stitch in time saves nine.” Notice how this is much more aesthetically pleasing than the equally logical “A stitch in time saves ten.” Note the rhymes in the following examples.

Prov. 11:22	“A pig with a pearl necklace is like a woman pretty but reckless.”	Williams
	“Like a gold ring in a swine’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.”	RSV
Prov. 15:17	“Greens with harmony beats beef without ’ny.”	PEU
	“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fattened ox and hatred with it.”	RSV
Prov. 17:7	“Talk about virtue is not for a churl, much less are lies for a noble soul!” (Note alliteration of <i>l</i> .)	Moffatt
	“Fine speech is not becoming to a fool, still less is false speech to a prince.”	RSV

Sometimes, we can do more than merely rhyme the end of a word, but rhyme multiple syllables or whole words that sound similar.

Prov. 12:2	“The Lord gives the good commendation, but to the evil condemnation.”	PEU
	“A good man obtains favor from the Lord, but a man of evil devices he condemns.”	RSV

3.1.3 Assonance

In the following examples, listen to the repetition of the vowel [i] (spelled *ee* and *ea*).

Prov. 15:17 alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Greens with gladness beats beef with bitterness.” “Peas with peace beats battles with beef.” “Greens with harmony beats beef without ’ny.” “Better beans with loving than beef with loathing.” 	PEU
	“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fattened ox and hatred with it.”	RSV

3.1.4 Homophones (homonyms)

In some cases, we can use homophones (as in the Prov. 14:1, below) or two different senses of the same sounding word (as in Prov. 14:12, below) and employ them, resulting in sound-based art and also making the listener/reader ponder the meaning carefully, (a common characteristic of proverbs).

Prov. 14:1	“Wisdom raises her house, folly razes hers.”	PEU
	“Wisdom builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down.”	RSV
Prov. 14:12	“There is a way which seems right to a man, but it leads (a man) right to death.”	PEU
	“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”	RSV

An artful proverb will sometimes have a double meaning possible; consider Moffatt’s rendering of Prov. 16:26, where the phrase “drives him to work” has two meanings, both of which reinforce the same idea:

Prov. 16:26	“A labourer’s appetite labours for him, it drives him to work.”	Moffatt
	“A worker’s appetite works for him, his mouth urges him on.”	RSV

3.1.5 Meter

In the following example translated from Amharic to English, a deliberate effort was made to match the meter of the two parallel lines:

“A word from the mouth spoken,
an egg from the hand broken.”

A more literal translation would have omitted an overt mention of the verb “spoken” in the first line of the proverb, but that would destroy the meter, as well as lessen the compact terse form of the proverb in English. In the Amharic original, each line is only three words, with the last syllable of each line rhyming. The rhyme of the English form is also pleasing.

3.2 Grammatical restructuring

A grammatical form, such as a rhetorical question, is much more likely to be transferable to the RL, if the RL uses such a grammatical structure in forming proverbs. Translators will more often feel free to use a different form of sound based verbal art, but when encountering proverbial forms that are based on a grammatical structure they are reluctant to consider RL grammatical alternatives, being more likely to transfer the SL grammatical structure into the RL.

However, transferring grammatical structures can be a trap. For example, the SL may use negative imperatives freely in proverbs, but RL proverbs may typically mitigate the force of such messages by using other, less direct grammatical forms. In the table below, compare the different grammatical forms that all convey the same basic message,

variations of a Persian proverb “Don’t carry two melons in one hand.” In some of them, the imperative force is greatly mitigated, in other it is strengthened.

1. “Don’t carry two melons in one hand.”	8. “Wisdom is shown by not carrying ...
2. “Don’t ever carry ...”	9. “Only a fool tries to carry ...
3. “Let nobody carry ...	10. “Never carry ...
4. “You should not carry...	11. “Can you carry ... ?
5. “Wise people do not carry ...	12. “Do we carry ... ?”
6. “Nobody can carry...	13. “How can you carry ... ?
7. “It is not wise to carry ...	14. “Do you see anybody carry ... ?

The following show more radical grammatical restructuring of this same proverb:

2 noun phrases	“Two melons, one hand.” or “One hand, two melons.”
noun phrase with prepositional phrase	“Two melons in one hand.” or “For two melons, a single hand?” (as irony or a question)
NP & PP with negative, no verb	“Never two melons in one hand.”
Rhyming couplet	“One hand, one thumb, two melons, it’s dumb.” or “Four fingers, one thumb, two melons, not done.”
Different form of grammar	“One hand cannot carry two melons.” or “One never sees two melons in one hand.” (no verb “carry”) “You’re trying to carry two melons in one hand.” or “It’s (as impossible as) carrying two melons in one hand.”
Different noun and number	“You can’t carry two/three pumpkins/cantaloupes/papayas/grindstones/chickens in one hand.” “You can’t carry ten eggs in one hand.”
Different verbs, not “carry”	“Two melons take two hands.” or “One never sees two melons in one hand.” “You can’t catch two chickens with one hand.”

As an example of grammatical adjustments, I rephrase a Biblical proverb into the pattern illustrated by an Amharic pattern mentioned above, simply two noun phrases placed side by side with the listener expected to understand the logical connection between the two.

“A quarreling wife, drizzling rain.” (Proverbs 19:13b)

In some languages, some synonymous parallelisms are better translated without the parallel structure. This has also been done in English, as in the following:.

Prov. 14:10	“Joy and sorrow can only be measured by the person concerned.”	The Word Made Fresh
	“The heart knows its own bitterness,	RSV

	and no stranger shares its joy.”	
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People may or may not prefer the restructured rendering, but it is an example of keeping the basic meaning of a proverb found in a parallelism while translating without a parallelism.

With some deliberate thought in this direction, translators can utilize RL artistic forms and phrase many Biblical proverbs into forms that are appreciated as artistic proverbs in the RL. But all this requires a conscious knowledge of the techniques used in RL proverbs, something best gained by systematic collection and study of RL proverbs.

A number of principles have been given for the translation of proverbs with more attention to verbal artistry. Below, I present different translations of several Biblical proverbs, showing how they have become more striking with attention to the principles presented here.

The following proverb has a built-in two-part structure, and many translators have found ways to make its structure sound like a typical English proverb.

1 Sam 24:13	“Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness.”	RSV
	“Wickedness comes from wicked people.”	God’s Word
	“From evildoers come evil deeds”	NIV
	“From evildoers, evil deeds”	PEU

Note that the last one is the shortest, resulting from a deliberate effort to be terse. To see the importance of being terse in English proverbs, compare the Living Bible rendition of Prov. 14:12, below, with the RSV:

Prov. 14:12	“Before every man there lies a wide and pleasant road that seems right but ends in death.”	Living Bible
	“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”	RSV

The Living Bible’s rendering of the above proverb is so long and deliberately clear that it does not strike one as a proverb in English. It may contain the same information as the original, but because of its length it lacks proverbial artistry in English. Remember, for proverbs the form is part of the meaning, so such examples fail to convey the appropriate genre, thereby missing some of the meaning.

3.2.1 Reordering parallelisms

Many language use parallelisms in forming proverbs, but we must be alert to notice the order of the parallel elements and strive to match the natural order of the RL. This is not distorting the meaning of the source text, but matching the grammar of the RL.

Peter Kirk sent me the following example of dealing with reordering parallelisms: “It is interesting that she [n.b. mother tongue translator] was less prepared to make the higher level adjustments such as reversing the lines of a proverb, e.g. to fit the pattern in the language that the negative comes before the positive (always “not A, B”, never “B, not A”), but when I pointed out particular places where it might be better to reverse the

lines for this reason, she was usually ready to take my suggestion.” Presumably, this would reorder the two lines in Prov. 14:33 as given below.

Prov. 14:33	“Wisdom abides in the mind of a man of understanding, but it is not known in the heart of a fools.”	RSV
	“Wisdom it is not known in the heart of a fools but it abides in the mind of a man of understanding.”	reordered

Note that the mother-tongue speaker of the RL did not automatically make the adjustment. She profited from a timely reminder of what had been found by analyzing RL proverbs.

Again, some languages use fewer types of parallel structures in proverbs, so it may be preferable to restructure some proverbs from a parallel structure to a non-parallel form.

3.2.2 Conjunctions

Many parallelisms in Proverbs are marked in English with “but” or some other overt conjunction. In the Hebrew, there was often/sometimes no overt conjunction (except the usual *vav*), but translators into English have often found it helpful to make the logical relation between the two lines more explicit, adding a conjunction, as in Prov. 14:5: “A faithful witness does not lie, *but* a false witness breathes out lies.” Translators should be alert to the possibility of translating such parallelisms without overt conjunctions if this is a standard RL technique and if the meaning is clear to the listener/reader. Or, they may need to add conjunctions in the RL where there are none in the SL.

Compare the following verses, where Moffatt has no overt conjunctions, forcing the hearer/reader to think and discover the logical relation between the parallel parts:

Prov. 14:4	“No oxen, no corn, good crops come from work done by the ox.”	Moffatt
	“Where there are no oxen, there is no grain; but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.”	RSV
Prov. 11:22	“A golden ring in the snout of a sow, and a pretty woman without sense”	Moffatt
	“Like a gold ring in a swine’s snout, is a beautiful woman without discretion.”	RSV

By contrast, Texmelucan Zapotec seems to use a conjunction where a more natural English translation would use none: “Don’t yearn for old age, *because* you get it for free.”

3.2.3 Quotations

In Amharic, many proverbs are expressed as a quotation from somebody, e.g. “‘Before you give birth, eat!’ said the person from Gonder.” In such proverbs, the quotation comes first, the speaker is identified afterwards. In translating quotation proverbs into Amharic, it would be important to consider matching this pattern. For

example, Psalm 14:1, (which can naturally have a proverbial quality in that it expresses a truth in a compact manner that is often and easily quoted) would become “‘There is no God,’ says the fool in his heart.” The same could be applied to Prov. 22:13 “The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!’ ”

3.3 How clear should a proverb be?

Notice that some Biblical proverbs are very clearly intended to make the listener/reader stop and ponder, such as Prov. 26:4,5: “Answer not a fool according to his folly...Answer a fool according to his folly...”. (See Wendland’s (2002) discussion of translating this passage from Proverbs in Chichewa.) The beginning of Proverbs specifically points to the fact that proverbs are not always easily or quickly understood, especially Prov. 1:5,6, explaining that this is written that “the man of understanding acquire skill to understand a proverb...”

In most languages, one of the hallmarks of a proverb is that it makes the listener (or reader) stop and ponder the meaning, so translators would be wise to restrain themselves in their desire to translate every proverb in a way that is instantly clear. In languages that frequently form proverbs that have a degree of non-transparency, translators should consider allowing a certain amount of symbolism, metaphor, and obscurity. Efforts to explain too many metaphors in the Toura translation project caused some to complain “You are telling the solution with the riddle” (Bearth 1979:12). It should still be possible for listeners/readers to arrive at the meaning after some thought, as in the example with “raises” and “razes” from Prov. 14:1, given earlier, but a proverb does not have to be as clear as a narrative passage. If the translated form of a proverb does retain some non-transparency, it is important that the form of such proverbs is clearly proverbial so that readers/hearers are alert to the need to look for multiple levels of meaning.

An example of a proverb that has been translated in a way that clarifies a figure by removing the figurative form, is the Living Bible’s rendition of Prov. 17:14. In many languages (including English), such a translation no longer strikes the hearer/reader as a proverb, or at best an artless one.

Prov. 17:14	“It is hard to stop a quarrel once it starts, so don’t let it begin.”	Living
	“The beginning of strife is like letting out water; so quit before the quarrel breaks out.”	RSV

Many proverbs are underlyingly hortatory, though their form may be indicative. Consider Prov. 21: 23, where the real point of the proverb is to urge the hearer/reader to be careful what they say, “He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.” In translating such proverbs, it is important that the underlying hortatory message is understood by the hearer/reader, realizing that there is something else underneath the simple form.

3.4 Utilizing local proverbs

Translators have sometimes been able to utilize existing RL proverbs in Biblical translation. This must be done with caution, but de Ward (1971:150) gives an example from Bamiléké that many will accept. The Bamiléké have a proverb “They, the others,

have eaten caterpillars and we have got stomach-ache.” In translating Ez. 18:2 “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, the children’s teeth are set on edge”, they adapted the RL proverb slightly, “They, our fathers, have eaten caterpillars and we have got stomach-ache.” The Bamiléké have no grapes, and the point of the proverb is not about a particular item that was eaten, so this was seen as a reasonable substitution.

The use of an existing RL proverb is also seen in the Living Bible’s rendering of Prov. 16:27: However, there was also a footnote giving the more literal form of this verse.

Prov. 16:27	“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop, idle lips are his mouthpiece”	Living
	“A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.”	RSV

Biblical proverbs have passed into many societies. Also, many Biblical proverbs teach truths that are universally applicable, regardless of religious systems. Therefore, it is not surprising to find proverbs in other cultures that match the message of Biblical proverbs.¹ One interesting example is found in Amharic, where there is a common proverb that seems to be a restatement of Prov. 16:9, but is more terse than the form in the Amharic Bible, as well as having both halves rhyme. Local church leaders should be consulted before incorporating the exact form of known RL proverbs in the translation of Biblical proverbs.

4. Example where RL techniques have been deliberately employed on a wide scale

The deliberate utilization of RL proverbial forms when translating Biblical proverbs can be noticed at various (too often isolated) points in various Bible translations, such as the NIV’s rendering of Prov. 11:4

“Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death.”

However, the most extreme and consistent use of RL forms may be the recent translation of the Proverbs into Kyrgyz (all information on this was told to me by Danny Vail of the Assemblies of God mission who works with the Kyrgyz team). The book of Proverbs was translated into Kyrgyz by a translator named Askar, following Kyrgyz proverbial structures in such a way that they can be sung in a traditional manner. Not surprisingly, the translator was freer than some would choose, such as adding a vocative term of endearment “my foal” to go with “my son” in Prov. 23:19 (presumably adding it to improve the meter). This translation of Proverbs was so well received in Kyrgyzstan that it was adopted for use in schools across the country!

Hatton (1976:230) reported that a translation committee in Thailand, after a study of Hebrew and Thai proverbs and poetry, decided to translate much of Proverbs into a

¹George Cotter, a Maryknoll priest in Ethiopia, has gone to great lengths to find and use local Oromo proverbs that parallel Scripture, using this as a way of winning a hearing for the Gospel (<http://www.maryknollafrika.org/ComCotter.htm>). He has even published a volume containing the four Gospels together with similar Oromo proverbs in a parallel column (1991).

poetic form called *suphaasit*. In this way, they were able to use a set of verbal art forms that are familiar and culturally appropriate to express proverbial sayings.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the translation of proverbs requires an appreciation of the fact that proverbs have an aesthetic quality in their form in the source text and a *conscious* awareness of the aesthetic techniques used forming in proverbs in the RL. Then the translator is in a much better position to remold foreign proverbs into meaningful and aesthetic forms in the RL. This is important because for proverbial speech, part of the meaning is the form. Put another way: if passage does not have a proverbial form, it will not have (as much) proverbial meaning.

All of this is not to take the place of careful exegesis of proverbs, but to provide the most attractive container for serving the fruits of exegesis. As translators of proverbs consciously study the RL proverb patterns, they will be better able to translate proverbs in a way that more closely matches RL proverb patterns, eliciting more appreciation from readers.

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