

Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 9, Challenges in Translation and Communication, Cultural Issues.

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This is Dr. George Payton in his teaching on Bible translation. This is session 9, Challenges in Translation and Communication, Cultural Issues, Part 1.

In our previous talks, we've been talking about some of the foundational ideas, concepts, and theories behind Bible translation.

Now, we're going to actually get into some of the challenges that you meet in trying to communicate the Gospel message and the Bible in other languages. There are basically two main general categories. The first one is linguistic.

There are simply language issues that happen and that are present in either the biblical language or the language you're trying to translate into that make communication not possible to do just a straight-over word-for-word translation. So, we will explore some of those in another talk. But in this talk, there will be two parts: what we're working on now is cultural issues in translation, why it is important to have an understanding of both cultures and how the culture can actually be the source of translation difficulties.

So, we're talking about transfer challenges of the linguistic sort and transfer challenges of the cultural sort. And so, we're starting with the cultural ones first. Let me just say a few things.

Everyone says, well, you need to understand the context. Well, what does context mean? It's a huge word and we're not going to cover all of it, but what are some of the factors that we have to look at when we look at Bible translation? The first thing is the context of the situation. What's happening right then and there? Where was Jesus when he was talking to this person or that person? And what is the context behind the events that are taking place that we're reading? But we also need to look at the situation within its cultural context and how does what's happening relate to the culture as a whole, their history, their beliefs, and many other things.

So, we're looking at the culture as part of the context of the biblical passage. Another thing is we look at the culture within the text itself. So, what is exactly happening in the text? What's happening between the people that are being discussed or the topic that's being discussed if it's not a narrative section? So, within the text.

But then also, what's going on within the sentence if there's a particular word that you're trying to translate? And what are the collocations of that word? A collocation means other words that occur with the word that you're looking at. So, collocation means co-location. They're located in the same sentence.

And why is that important? We will see how that really does impact the way that we interpret a particular word. When we interpret that word, it helps us to know how to translate it. All of these things are at play and interact in our minds every time we read a passage of scripture, every time we read a verse of scripture.

So, let me give an example. Now I want to ask you, I'm going to read a sentence and you're going to tell me what mental picture comes to your mind when I read this sentence. He bought a ring for his girlfriend.

What mental picture comes to mind? How many of you thought, oh, the guy's going to propose to the girl? Did I say engagement ring? I didn't. But how many people thought engagement ring? You probably did. How many people thought that he hadn't proposed yet? Why? Because it's he buys a ring for his girlfriend, the girl that he's been dating, and he falls in love with her, and she's in love with him, and she's giving him all the right signals.

And he says it's time, as we say in English, to pop the question. From that simple sentence, he and ring and girlfriend popped in this picture in your mind and my mind, the guy is going to propose and it's a marriage proposal. You see how the words in the sentence and the context of the guy and the girl trigger this understanding, this background knowledge and culture, and what we do.

It all got triggered in a split second just from reading the sentence. And if we look at that, let me ask you. When a guy proposes to a girl, which knee does he use? Which leg does he use to kneel down? The right one.

Okay. How many of you from other cultures have no idea what I'm talking about kneeling down? I never said what kneeling down meant, right? But you're from America, and you know it, and I know it, and it's usually the right leg. Why? Who knows? Maybe the guy's right-handed, and that's easy to have.

I don't know. Anyway, you all knew that that's part of what I was talking about. Why? because we know the context, we know those life situations in our culture, and we know the typical things that happen.

So, we know what, we know where, we know the sequence of events, we know what he's supposed to say, right? We know all of that. That little sentence triggers all of those things in our minds. Maybe not all at the same time, but at least we get a picture of it and that's what makes us think of that.

Okay? So, we're talking about these cultural frames of reference and if you look at the word, it's the meaning frame of reference or the semantic frame of reference that's surrounding this particular event. And so, we're looking at the whole scenario of what usually happens in that context. And that scenario is not written in the sentence.

It's triggered by the context. That's really, really important. So, not only do we figure out the meaning, but we also figure out what is triggered by the sentence itself.

Boyfriend-girlfriend engagement is on the way, but also the whole backstory behind it. So, we need to understand that sentences are not only couched in the context of the text but the sentences and the text are couched in the whole cultural milieu of that particular society. Okay, I'm going to read you another sentence.

He bought a ring for his fiancée. Are those the same thing? Mostly yes, right? But what happened? He already proposed to her. Now, what kind of guy proposes without a wedding ring, without going and buying the ring first? Actually, I did, and my wife graciously said yes anyway.

So, I obviously got her the ring, but it didn't happen right then when I proposed to her, right? So, we see how one word different gives us a slight variation on that cultural framework, a slightly different frame of reference than he proposed or he bought a ring for his girlfriend. So, I guarantee you if a guy and a girl on a date, let's say they're having dinner together, and he gets up from the table and he pulls something out of his pocket, and he kneels down with his right knee, she starts going crazy and she's like, oh my goodness, is he really proposing? He proposes, and then she says yes, and then the whole restaurant applauds. Engagement as opposed to already being engaged, and then he buys the engagement ring for her.

So, what are we saying? We're saying that these mental pictures are a part of this cultural frame, this cultural frame of reference that is triggered by the words in the sentence, and it triggers the situational context that we know. This is part of the reason why we say that language is cryptic and inferential. Cryptic means it's shortened or condensed.

By inferential, it means that the person needs to infer or figure out what was said, and we figure out most of the time what was said because we have all of this knowledge, this encyclopedic knowledge, this vast storehouse of knowledge in our brains that we share with other people in our culture. Each person has their own, but we also share a good bit in common, and that allows communication to happen in a short way. You can talk to an American, or you can talk to a person from your home area, and you say, hey, did you ever go to such and such a restaurant? Yeah, I love that place.

You don't have to tell what street it's on or anything, everybody knows it because that's the most famous restaurant. So that shared knowledge, that shared encyclopedic cultural knowledge is what enables communication to happen, and we see the people in the Bible communicating in the same way. And we see truncated statements and we see simplified comments that are loaded with meaning beyond what was said.

So, we have to understand the context, the context of the situation, the cultural context. And you remember in a previous lecture I mentioned yellow buses, that's an example. When I mentioned yellow buses, we all knew we're talking about school children being picked up and taken to school and then taken home at the end of the day.

So, the yellow buses, notice that we don't have any other buses colored yellow in America except school buses. I think they probably did that by design. So all I need to say is yellow buses, and we all know what we're talking about.

Okay, we have the word make, and we're going to use the word make in a couple of different ways. This is going to illustrate the point that not only do we need to pay attention to the words in the sentence, but we also need to keep in mind the picture that it brings into our minds, that semantic, that cultural frame that hides behind the text that's outside the text. So, Jane made up a shopping list.

Fairly straightforward. What did she do? She wrote down a list of things that she wanted to buy. The word buy is inherent in the word shopping.

And a lot of times, not every time, but a lot of times, it's grocery shopping. So she goes through the fridge, the pantry, and whatever else and makes a list of the things they're out of and the things that she wants to get. And so, she writes down this list of items.

Made up means compiling a list of items. What about this one? John made up with Jane. What mental picture does that evoke? What cultural situation does that bring to mind? John and Jane are probably in some kind of relationship.

Probably a relationship a romantic relationship, and not just, it could be a work relationship, but oftentimes, the first thing that I thought of when I saw this sentence was it's a romantic relationship. What else can we infer? Again, we're inferring, we're guessing, we're trying to figure it out. What else can we infer from this sentence? Made up.

What does made up mean? It means to reconcile. It means to come together again. Make the peace.

And who was the offending party? Probably John. He probably offended his girlfriend or fiancé or wife, and he needed to do something to make the situation right. Maybe he went and apologized and took her some flowers and said, I'm really, really sorry, and whatever.

So, it's that whole concept of reconciliation in a relationship. And it all happens because he didn't make up a thing, he made up with someone. Those words brought that situation to mind.

What about this one? John made out like a bandit. We're going to talk about idioms in a different one, but let's just talk about these idioms right now. Made out.

Did John make something? No. Made out like a bandit is a whole phrase that we take. We can't take these idioms apart word for word and then try to translate each word.

You can't do that. It's a whole package. It's a whole unit.

Made out like a bandit means he was very successful in some endeavor beyond what was expected. So, a bandit is a thief who then comes and steals a bunch of stuff and so he has all this stuff that he got without much effort. So, John made out like a bandit.

Maybe he went to the store and got a really good deal on something. Somehow, he benefited greatly in a particular situation. We don't know what.

So that little word out changes everything. That word out changes the whole meaning of the word make. And so make out is a separate unit apart from made up or make up.

And we saw make up can have at least two meanings and probably more. I hope I'm not being too over linguistic-y, but these words are really important. So when you go to seminary, and you learn to break down the words of Greek, and you learn how to parse, and you learn how all of these verbs have a gazillion different verb forms, the past and the present and the future and the pluperfect and all this other stuff, and we miss the forest for the trees.

What are the words in the sentence, how do they associate with each other, and how do those other words help us understand the word that's in question? So, if we get too close to it and too analytical we miss some of these things. But these are things that are still analytical in one sense. And all I am doing is making what you already know obvious.

What's wrong in the situation of translation is the way that they use the language in the Bible is not obvious to us because we are not from that culture and we are not from that language. That's the problem. And so, we have to apply what we know about breaking down our own culture to the biblical languages and to their cultural situations so that we can understand it and remember the process of translation, understanding the text, and then communicating it in this other language.

I have another sentence. I apologize ahead of time, but here it is. John made out with Jane.

Okay, y'all know what it means, right? But the fact that it's with Jane and not something else brings a whole different picture in our minds of the cultural situation of a dating relationship and what they do. So, as we look at the Bible, let's apply these same lenses, if you want to put it that way, let's apply these same criteria for breaking down the content in the biblical text. So, we're going to have some Bible examples now.

So, this one is from Mark. Mark 1, 40-45, Jesus was up in the Galilee region. And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching him and falling on his knees before him, saying, If you are willing, you can make me clean.

Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I am willing, be cleansed. Immediately, the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed. He certainly warned him and immediately sent him away.

And he said to him, See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them. Okay, so let's say that we're trying to translate this passage into Swahili, and we come to this first verse. The first verse says, And a man with leprosy came to Jesus, imploring him and kneeling down and saying to him, If you are willing, you can make me clean.

Pretty straight forward and simple, right? Yeah, but there's a problem. Just like in English, you can have several different words for clean, to make something clean or to clean something, we have the same thing in Swahili. So, in Swahili, the first word is Safisha.

So, you can Safisha a house, making it all clean. So you arrange things and sweep and dust and whatever. You have the word Osha, which the root of Osha is Oga, which means to bathe.

So, Osha means you clean something with water, like dishes. Osha. Fuwa, fuwa is only used for clothing.

You don't fuwa dishes, you don't fuwa the house, you only fuwa clothing or cloth. And then the fourth one is Takasa, to purify. So, when a Muslim, before they go into the mosque, they have to do their ritual washing, and that is called Takasa, to do that.

So, the person comes out pure. So, which one of these words do we choose? Let's look at the passage again, and maybe we can figure this out. Okay, so a leper came to Jesus, beseeching him and falling on his knees before him, saying, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

So the word leper to a first-century person does what? It explodes in their mind this whole complex of what leprosy is and how to deal with leprosy. And if we took the time, we would go back to Leviticus, and there's like two or three chapters of what you need to do if you have leprosy. And if we look at it, leprosy is in a section of Leviticus that talks about more than just leprosy; it talks about cleanliness.

And so, if you touch a dead animal, or if you touch a dead body, you are unclean until nightfall. A woman's monthly cycle makes her unclean until she's done. Relations between a husband and wife make them unclean until they wash.

And so, this whole thing of leprosy is couched in this whole thing of clean and unclean. But more than that, it has to do with ritual purity. A person who's unclean is not allowed to go and worship at the temple.

A person who's unclean needs to wash, to cleanse themselves, to follow the rituals that are laid out in Leviticus before they're allowed to re-enter into the worship community. In English, we do not have this concept of ritual purity. In many cultures that I've dealt with, and I've talked to people in Africa that we've worked with, I've talked to people from Asia who are from Asia, different parts of Asia, and many of them have this concept of ritual purity and ritual impurity.

And so, it's a known thing to them, but we who are not from that culture, we don't understand. So, what happens if Jesus touches the leper? Jesus becomes what? Unclean. However, if you read in Leviticus, and this whole thing of clean and unclean, and you have the instructions about the altar, and the things associated with the altar, and true it says, if something unclean touches something, then it makes that thing unclean.

However, it also says that if something holy or clean that's been purified touches something else, it makes that thing clean. What does that tell us about Jesus here? Jesus is holy, and by touching this unholy, unclean man, he makes him ritually pure and clean. Is that just my speculation? Well, let's read on.

Where does Jesus send him? Say this: you say nothing to anyone, but go where? To the doctor, and have the doctor check you out. No. Go to the priest, because the priest allows you back into the religious worshipping community.

Where was the priest in relation to this man? The priest was in Jerusalem, a hundred miles away, and this whole process of becoming clean according to the law of Moses, takes about a week. So, you're there for a whole week, and then you show yourself, and you bathe a few times and do all these things. So, the man knew that he had to go down to Jerusalem in order to do this, but you go to the priest because you need to be declared ritually pure.

Along with that, we know that people who have leprosy were not only cast out from the community, they were away from their families, too. They couldn't go and touch their family people. They couldn't go home, and so when Jesus healed him, he brought him back into his life.

He gave him a new life. He gave him his family back. He gave him his community back.

He belonged again. And so, all of that is tied up into this. And so, understanding that, then we look at these Swahili words, then it's obvious which one we choose.

We choose the last one. And this is what the Swahili Bible says: If you are willing, you can takasa me. You can make me ritually clean.

Let me go back to that other passage just a second, and draw out some other things that we've been talking about in some of the previous talks that I've given. We've talked about things that are obviously stated explicitly. We've talked about things that are hinted at that are not obviously stated.

And this passage has a lot of them. That whole thing about clean and unclean is one of the huge backstories that aren't talked about. And why isn't it talked about? Jesus doesn't need to mention it because he's speaking to this leper who knows.

And the leper knows that Jesus knows. They both know. Mark also knows that his writers, excuse me, his readers, first century Jews, they also know.

We're all from this. We've had these laws for maybe a thousand years since Moses. So, everybody knew it.

So, Mark doesn't need to mention it, and he can truncate his passage here. Then, let's look at what Jesus says. Go and show yourself to the priest.

Which priest? Was there more than one priest? Yes. There was a high priest, and there were other priests who did the work. And specifically, the work of sacrificing animals.

The tribe of the Levites and the priests are a subset of that. The priests sacrificed animals and other things. But the Levites never touched the animals.

That was only a duty of the priest. And so you've got to go to the priest. And reading in commentaries you get the idea.

The priest that was on duty at that time, or one of the priests who happened to be there in the temple when you go down there. Okay. Offer for your cleansing.

Remember, he's been healed, and he needs to do some things. And that's what's laid out in Leviticus. It's what Moses commanded.

So that's a reference back to Leviticus. So, the priest at some point says, you are clean. And then he washes, and then they have this sacrifice, and then a feast.

Who is the feast for? The man? And is it for the priest? No, it's not. It's maybe for his family or the community around them. So, as a testimony to them, is that a testimony to the priests? Probably not because the priests already know.

They were the ones who said, okay, you're good. You're clean. It's a testimony to everyone else, to the community, that you are free to move back into society and move with them.

It's kind of like when you were in COVID, and you were sick with COVID, and you couldn't come into work because you were sick with COVID. You needed a doctor's report to say you've been tested for COVID and you are not sick anymore with COVID. How serious was that? Sometimes it was very serious.

My brother-in-law and his family, during COVID, moved to Germany to take up a job with an American company there, right in the middle of COVID. And so, we were with them right before they left. And he said, yeah, we have to have a COVID test.

This is for the German government, by the way. We had to have a COVID test within 36 hours of getting on the plane. Afterward, we had to take a test when we got off.

And they don't give COVID tests to children, so they keep them isolated and quarantined for a week. And if they don't have any symptoms after the week, then you get this report that says you're good to go. The German government is very strict.

You can't break any of those rules. If you don't do it, you're not leaving that hotel where you and your kids are. That's this kind of situation.

You needed the right authorities to give you that approval that you're free and clean and not going to infect any other people. Culture. We're steeped in it, and we don't realize it.

So, as we said, Swahili is to purify. Now let's say that you've read the book of Mark as the first book that you read, and then you read this passage in Luke. While he was on the way to Jerusalem, he was passing through Samaria and Galilee, he entered a village.

Ten leprous men who stood at a distance met him, and they raised their voices, saying, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. When he saw them, he said to them, Go show yourselves to the priests. And as they were going, they were cleansed.

Takasa. Great. Why were they standing at a distance? If you understand leprosy, we've already talked about that.

They can't come close to people. Right? So, you already know that from Mark. All this here makes sense to you.

Why did Jesus send him to the priests? That's the standard procedure that you do. And as they were going, they were not healed. It doesn't say healed.

It says cleansed. Okay. So, because we have that knowledge from Mark, because we've done our research and we understand leprosy in the New Testament and the Old Testament, then we understand this without much explanation.

Isn't that great? We're already there. So, we can just read this, and we get it, and then read the rest of the passage. Okay.

Let's talk about another passage. This passage in Mark, it begins with Jesus and his interaction with a synagogue ruler, and then it moves on from that to someone else. When Jesus crossed over again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around him.

So, he stayed by the seashore. One of the synagogue officials named Jairus came up and, on seeing him, fell at his feet and implored him earnestly, saying, my little daughter is at the point of death. Please come and lay your hands on her so that she will get well and live.

He went off with him, and a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Remember that expression, pressing in on him. The story continues.

A woman who had had a hemorrhage for 12 years and had endured much at the hands of many physicians and had spent all that she had was not helped at all, but rather had grown worse. After hearing about Jesus, she came up in the crowd behind him and touched his cloak, for she thought if I just touched his garments, I would get well. Immediately, the flow of her blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction.

Immediately, Jesus, perceiving himself that power proceeding from him had gone forth, turned around in the crowd and said, who touched me? Who touched my garments? And his disciples said to him, you see the crowd looking around, you see the crowd pressing in on you, and you say, who touched me? And he looked around to see the woman who had done this. But the woman, fearing and trembling, aware of what had happened to her, came, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your affliction.

So, we're trying to translate this passage and we're trying to translate this part aware of what had happened. And whatever happened caused her to be afraid. Again, we want to remember the cultural, we want to remember the situation, we want to remember the scenario of what happened.

And so, if you kind of play this thing in your mind like a video, what do we see? We see Jesus and Jairus and they're walking. And these people are all around them and Jesus is being jostled and bumped and pushed maybe as he and Jairus are walking along. And then he feels something.

He feels some kind of energy coming out of his body. And that's when he says, who touched me? And his disciples go, I'm sorry, sir, no disrespect, but everyone is touching you? So, we're not sure why you're saying this. And he goes, no, but somebody touched me.

And Jesus meant touched by someone had touched me, and this healing was connected there. What was she afraid of? She was unclean, wasn't she? It's clear the hemorrhage relates to her cycle, and she had not been able to stop the flow of blood for 12 years, and she went from doctor to doctor to doctor. They could do nothing for her.

And then she was at the end of a rope. She had no idea what to do. She heard Jesus is coming.

How did she get to Jesus? She pushed her way through the crowd, coming closer and closer and closer and coming up behind Jesus, probably. And she said, if I just touch

his cloak, if I just touch the edge of his garment, then I will be cleaned. And she goes, and she touches his clothes.

And then that happens. What happened then? Then Jesus looked at her and realized, you're the one who touched me. And she panics, and she's stricken with this anxiety attack.

Oh, my goodness, I'm going to get in serious trouble. For what? For touching all those people in the crowd. She pushed through.

She was not supposed to come near anyone. She was supposed to keep her hands off, just almost like a leper. When she comes up to him, she actually touches Jesus himself.

The sin of all sins, an unclean person touching Jesus. Again, you don't just come up and touch somebody; you usually ask permission first. Well, she didn't do that because she was afraid.

So here she is. She's going to get in serious trouble because she infected, as it were, she touched and made unclean a whole bunch of people. We get that from the understanding of the culture.

We get that from the understanding of clean and unclean. And we get that from the physical situation of her doing what she did. And now Jesus says, don't worry.

It's all good. You're not going to get in trouble. Go in peace.

You have been healed. And with the healing, then would come cleansing. She probably had to do some ritual and stay isolated until sundown, as commanded in Leviticus.

So, this view of the culture gives us insights, aware of what? Aware that she had been found out. Aware that they might punish her. She was aware of the situation that she was going to be confronted for what she did.

And that she knew that she had done something wrong that she shouldn't have done according to the customs in this society. So, all of that is in our minds when we read this text. When we were translating this in Tanzania, I knew that there was something here but I wasn't really sure.

Later, I came and did studies on semantics, cognitive semantics, and all these other things. And then I thought, that's what's happening here. This particular phrase and this particular scenario are couched in this whole culture thing.

And so, I realized that. But I sensed something was wrong when we were trying to translate it into these languages in southern Tanzania. But I couldn't put my finger on it.

Coming home and doing more studies then, I was aware of what was happening here. So, when we talk about context, we're talking about the text, we're talking about the scenario, we're talking about several different things. One of the things we mentioned before was the register of the dialogue between there and the register of the text itself to the reader.

We talked about the genre. What kind of genre is this? This is a narrative. It's an account.

It's probably factual. And there could be a spiritual teaching point. Jesus brings that out.

Your faith has made you well. He then goes on and does the same thing with Jairus. So, faith is the main point.

Then, you look at the whole discourse. So, you've got Jairus, you've got the woman, you've got faith. So, all of that fits together.

And we look at all of that as we're trying to understand. And so, really, what we're saying is that we look at the text. We're trying to put together all that we know about the text so that we can then figure out what is being communicated here by the writer.

But then we also have one other thing. We look at that scenario. And that scenario really does help bring things clear to us when we see what happened.

Why was the woman afraid? Why did the things in the account happen? Why did the people say what they said? So, in communication and translation, so we have to understand the cultural background. We have to understand that properly in order to understand the biblical text. Understanding the culture can fill in the gaps for us.

There's a bunch of gaps in communication that we don't get. Even the things that are explicit don't tell us everything. Like she was afraid because of what was happening to her.

We don't know what that means. That's explicit. It tells us.

But what is the implied stuff? We don't know. But we have to look deeper and investigate that. And then we say, how can we fill the gaps? So, one of the ways is what word did we choose? So, if you go back to the one about will you make me

clean or will you cleanse me, the word that we chose fit with the context of the ritual purity.

That's one of the ways that we can translate culturally meaningful language. Another thing, sometimes you just want to leave the text like it is, but you want to add a footnote that explains what he was talking about this or what was happening was this. But with something as big as leprosy, leprosy is so entwined in this huge cultural frame of cleanliness and ritual purity, and then there are sub-frames within that, and one of those sub-frames is leprosy.

So, sometimes it's too much to put in a footnote, and so you put it into a glossary, and you can explain some of these things. We have glossaries in our Bibles. It's not a given that there will be a glossary in these other Bibles, but if there's a glossary there, then at least the people have more resources to understand, particularly if we need to have a text that stays closer to the form of the Greek.

They need the gaps to be filled somewhere, and so we try to do that. Where can we fill those gaps? Okay, so thank you very much, and we'll carry on with this topic of cultural differences in the next talk. Thank you.

This is Dr. George Payton in his teaching on Bible translation. This is session 9, Challenges in Translation and Communication, Cultural Issues, Part 1.