Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 2, Introduction to Bible Translation, Part 2

© 2024 George Payton and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. George Payton in his teaching on Bible Translation. This is session 2, Introduction to Bible Translation, Part 2.

Hello, this is George Payton. I am continuing the series on Bible Translation, and we're talking about What is Translation, introduction to this, and this is part two. And last time, we talked about translation. What is translation? It's transferring the meaning of a text from one language to another.

We talked about what is the difference between translating and verbally interpreting and some of those differences. And now we're going on to some other aspects of Bible translation. Okay, there's an author, Juliana House, she wrote a book back in 2016 and it's a big thick book, about an inch thick on translation.

And she collated a number of translation definitions from different scholars, and there's like six or eight of them, and they're all different. And they all have their own spin on what they call it. And so it's really hard to pin it down and come up with the definition of translation.

But in essence, let's talk about some of the main things that we can all agree on about translation, and we can talk about the process. And that gives us a picture, rather than coming up with a "dictionary definition" of what translation is. So, you start with the source text in whatever language it is, and ST is the Source Text.

And then, you transfer the meaning of that source text into the target text. And that comes from the source language and the target language. And so, we're talking about communicating the meaning, we're talking about equivalence, there's some kind of equalness to it, there's some kind of purpose for the text, it was produced for some particular reason.

This has been discussed throughout the ages since at least Roman times. Horace was a scholar and an orator, and he had his own ideas of translation. If we continue, we look at the work of Jerome when he translated the Vulgate, the Latin Bible, into Latin.

It's the common language in Latin, the Vulgate. He had his own views of what translation should be. So it should be sense by sense instead of word for word, except when it comes to the scriptures.

And he was very, very careful to translate the scriptures. And he said even the punctuation marks in Greek and Hebrew are relevant. And they tell us things about the meaning and we need to take those seriously when transferring the meaning.

And so there's this dichotomy, and this dichotomy, we call it literal versus free. And they've been wrestling with whether they should do literal translations or do free translations since the time of Jerome and even before that. And so if you look at that, what does literal mean? What does free mean? Unfortunately, they're both too vague to really be of use.

So, when we talk about this dichotomy of literal versus free, it somehow is not very helpful. At the same time, we hear it everywhere. It's ubiquitous.

But also, even though it's not helpful, it is useful as a starting point to start the conversation. And so this is something that's been discussed. When you translate a novel, should that be word for word, or should that be sense for sense? Or should that be meaning for meaning somehow? When you translate a legal document, should that be word for word and literal, or should that be more expressive? All these questions have been going on since translation began.

And really the very first time that we had the scriptures being translated was when the Old Testament was translated into Greek, and that's called the Septuagint, and that was translated around 200-300 BC up to the time of Christ. They had different people producing different portions of the Septuagint. So, this whole thing of literal versus free is talking about the language side.

It's talking about whether the form of the end product should look like the form of the original product. And that's generally what people mean when they say literal versus free. You can never be word for word between one language and another.

You just can't. Even our most literal Bibles in English don't do that. And we'll get some examples of that.

But this whole thing of literal is on the language side, but then we also struggle with culture to culture. You have a translation of, let's say, the Book of Genesis was written to a particular people in a particular time period in history, and they were in their own culture and their own historical background, the things that happened to them, and their own cultural understanding, their worldview, their values, all of those things were associated with that text because the people who wrote it or the person who wrote it was writing to that group of people, his own or her own culture, people of the same language and tribe. And so, when we go and do this transfer thing, we have difficulties because we don't come from that same culture.

We don't come from that same environment, the whole social milieu. And so, we have to deal with that when we come up with translation. So, we're not just translating words.

It's not just a matter of getting this word over here for that word over there or this sentence here for this sentence over here. It's really how we depict the world of the source language and the source text in the target language communicated in the target text. Those are some of the challenges, and we will illustrate these different topics as the series continues.

Okay, so as we said, we have the source text, and then we're trying to translate the meaning of the source text into the target text. One of the things that House brings out is that you're always looking backward and forwards. What does that mean? It means when you're doing the translation, you translate a part of it, and then you go back, and you look at the source text.

Did I get that part right? So, you read the source text, you read what you've written in the target text, and you're always going back and forth because you always want to make sure we communicated it well. Is it accurate? Does the meaning carry over? And so there's always this relationship of back and forth. Another thing that is factor in translation is what is the culture's view of translated material. Is the translation somehow secondary? This is particularly true in languages that have a history of literature in their language and in their culture, and they have a history of things being translated into that language. And so, then the question is, how do the local people of that particular culture in that particular literary system view a translated product? Is it secondary? Is it lesser quality? Is it inferior? In our case, is the English Bible inferior to the Greek or the Hebrew? Something to think about.

What do you think about most people in church? Do they sit there and they think, dang, I wish I had the Greek instead of this ESV that I'm looking at, or whatever? Probably not. Somehow the Bible in these different languages, and it's done this in English too, it then becomes our Bible. This is the English Bible.

We don't think about it being a translation because we've been reading it since we were kids or we've been reading it since we were Christians or believers. So we just take it like it is, accept it, and don't really see it as a translation. Many people don't.

Some people might, but a lot of times, the average person in the church doesn't sit there and go, excuse me, pastor, the Greek doesn't say that. No, we don't see that. Because you sit there and you're listening to what the pastor's trying to say.

Some of my linguistic students, after having taken translation courses, say, well, actually, sometimes it's hard for me to listen to the pastor because they do get the

Greek wrong. And some of my students sometimes say that the translation courses have ruined their reading of the Bible. But usually, it's not the case.

So, what are we talking about? We're talking about semantic equivalence or equivalence in meaning. That's a very important thing. And this author, House, she puts it this way.

In translation, we are focusing on the original and the translated text in that we analyze it and systematically link the forms and functions detected in the analysis of the original letters in order to reveal the author's original intended motives and choices. Ultimately, linguistic translation analysis aims to empower the translator to make her own grounded choices. In other words, we analyze the source text, the forms, how those forms are used in that language, what is the author's motivation for writing it, the whole thing of the intent of the author, and then how do we transfer those into this other language.

So, what is translation? Going back to translation, translation is a process of transferring a written text from a source language to a target language conducted by a translator or translators in a specific sociocultural context, which means the sociocultural context of the people of the target language. Number two, second of all, the written product or the target text, which results from that process and which functions in the sociocultural context of the target language. Sorry, the first one was the sociocultural context of the source text.

Number two is the sociocultural context of the target language and the target text. Then three are the cognitive, linguistic, visual, cultural, and ideological phenomena, which are an integral part of numbers one and two. What do we mean by that? That means that you really have to think through.

This is a cognitive process. It's linguistic. You think of the language.

You're thinking of words. You're thinking of phrases. And it's visual.

You're trying to paint this picture of what this other culture is like, what is the meaning related to them, and what is the meaning then related to us. And so, there's culture there that's involved. There are different ideologies that come into play.

The worldview of the people in the Bible is different from our worldview today. How do you bridge those gaps? All of that is what we consider to be translation, the translation of the source text to the target text and then the cognitive and linguistic features. So, some different types of translations have been identified.

The first type of translation would be intralingual, intra-meaning within. And so this is within the same language. What if we have examples of intralingual translation? Intralingual translation is what you do when you paraphrase something.

For example, if you're talking to a child and they ask you, what does this mean? Then you have to then put that into simpler language meaning the same thing. Yesterday, my daughter-in-law was talking to our three-year-old grandson, and she said, God is omnipotent. And he said, what does that mean? And so, she said that means that God is all powerful.

That is an example of intralingual translation. When you have technical language, and you want to communicate it to somebody who's not in that particular field, then that gets transferred into a different form so that those people can understand it. Windows for Dummies would be an example of that.

You've got these technocrats, these geeky guys that speak computer language and, sorry, can you say it in English? And so, that would be an example of intralingual translation. Interlingual is the one that we think about most between two different languages. And we'll spend most of our time on that one, but I want to mention a third one and that is inter-semiotic.

And semiotics means signs or symbols and a system of signs and symbols. And so what do you do when you translate something from one sign system to another sign system? For example, oral speaking, the sound waves is one, as it were, sign system and every language is different and so they use sound waves differently. The same thing with a written alphabet.

The written alphabet is a different sign system that communicates thought. So, it takes the sound wave system and puts it into the written system using symbols for this particular language. So that's what we're talking about.

But in some ways, we're talking about taking a text that's written and putting it into spoken or something spoken and making it written. Let's broaden our understanding and concept of inter-semiotic. What about a book that's set into a movie? That's inter-semiotic on a number of different levels.

Or a drama presentation of a particular book. Or a drama of a particular play on Broadway that is then made into a movie. Or you take a book that's involved in that.

What about songs? Songs of particular topics. So we have a whole number of ways that inter-semiotic translation is being carried out. Today, we don't normally think of it as translation, but in one sense, it actually is.

So if you take a French novel and you make a movie in English, that's been a translation language-wise, as well as the sign system. So, it's from written to a movie, a video. So, those kinds of translation processes are relevant even to Bible translation.

And we call that in Bible translation circles, material that is used for Scripture engagement. What do we mean by Scripture engagement? Scripture engagement: we want people to engage with the content of the Bible. We want people to engage with reading their Bibles.

So, what kind of things have you grown up with that are not the Bible, but they are things that are about the Bible? Has anyone seen Bible storybooks for kids? Veggie tales, videos, kids' songs. I say this, and sometimes young people don't know what I mean by it, but flannel graphs. A flannel graph is when you have a flannel piece of cloth, and then you have little characters that are cut out of that same cloth, and then you stick it up there, and then the teacher teaches a lesson.

Bible studies would be Scripture engagement material. Bible studies are for children, and Bible studies are for adults. Again, movies.

The Jesus film would be one. And what's going on today? What is the TV series that's going on today? The Chosen. The Chosen is Scripture engagement.

The Chosen is inter-semiotic translation. And people love it. It's great.

We get to see visually what the Bible might have been like. Was it exactly like that? No. Is it close enough to give us at least an idea? It has some usage.

And why do we produce Scripture engagement material? Are you teaching a Bible study by watching The Chosen? No. That's not why we have it. We have it because that material draws us in and makes a cognitive mental connection but also a spiritual and an emotional connection.

We get drawn into Bible content from watching things like The Chosen, listening to songs, and reading books. The purpose is to engage us more with the Scriptures and God. Just think of the songs that we sing in church.

Why do we sing songs in church? Because it's a part of worship. It connects us to God. So, the whole field of Scripture engagement is an important part of the Bible translation movement today because we need more than just that book.

You and I did when we became Christians, and we grew in our faith. Some of you started out as a child. I did not.

I came to faith when I was an adult. But all of that to say, we need more than the Scriptures. And so, Bible translation today involves Scripture engagement of different material.

Moving on, I'd like to talk about what makes a good translation. We're talking about four qualities of a good translation. First of all, a good translation, and this is print translation now.

This is not Scripture engagement material. Print translation needs to be accurate. The meaning needs to be the meaning of the biblical text.

We don't have license to change that. And so, when we look at our principle of accuracy, we're not adding anything to the text that shouldn't be there. We're not taking anything away.

We're not changing anything. Nothing is added, nothing is changed, and nothing is taken away. So, those three things are kind of what we look at.

Second of all, it should sound like normal language. It should not sound strange. I heard that there's a professor at one seminary who has a picture of Yoda on his door, and he's a Greek teacher, and it says on the poster, Yoda speak is okay.

Yoda speak is okay. Yoda speak is okay in Greek class. Yoda speak is okay when you take that Greek exam and your prof wants to know, did you really understand all these words? And so you end up sending like to the store, went, did he, eh? Imagine if your whole Bible was written that way.

It would get old really, really quickly. You would get tired of hearing and reading that. In Bible translation, Yoda speak is not okay.

It should sound normal. It should sound like people really talk with some cautions in there. But let's move on.

So natural sounding, normal language. Another thing is it needs to be understandable. So if I speak to you in Swahili, all of a sudden I jump into Swahili and start talking.

You can't understand me. Really, it's useless for me to do that. There's no point in it because you don't understand.

Does our scripture communicate well? Do people understand it? And if they don't, have we done our job of translation? Remember, it's communication, and we're going to deal with the communication issue in a few minutes. So, is it accurate? Is it natural? Is it clear? The last one is whether it is acceptable. Is it what people are

expecting? And by this, we want to know, do these people like the way that we've translated it in such a way that they are happy to read it? In Tanzania, there was one language that was translated by a different agency, a different Bible. A Bible translated by a different agency in this one language in southern Tanzania.

They were trying to update a translation that had been done a hundred years before. The first translation was done in 1910, and here it is in the late 90s, and they're trying to produce an updated version. What they actually did was start over.

And they translated the whole Bible in about six years. And I've been to churches of that language group, and I asked them, so how do you like that Bible? Oh, we don't like it. Why not? Ah, we just don't.

And I never really found out why. But basically, they said, we don't like anything about it, and we are not using it. Okay? They did not accept it, and you know that they didn't accept it because they don't buy it, they don't purchase it, and they don't use it.

We don't want our Bibles to be sitting in a box in a warehouse. We want our Bibles to be used, so we need to make sure that it's acceptable. Now, these are the four qualities that we aim for as we're doing the translation process.

These are also the four qualities that we use in order to evaluate this translation at the end of the process or let's say, toward the end of the process. And so one of the things that we normally do in translation, in the Bible translation world, is, let's say that we've translated a particular book, like the Book of Jonah. We will then take it out and read it with people, and we will ask, so what do you think this is saying? Can you put it into your own words? What is it saying? Are there any words in there that you didn't know? Yeah, we didn't know what that word was.

So, we ask them these questions so that we can say, is it natural sounding? Is it clear? And is it acceptable? Do you like it? This is something that you would be happy reading and using. So we use those goals on the front end to then be the yardstick, the measurement tools at the end of the process. So, our goal is then to produce a quality presentation of God's word in the receptor language, the same thing as the target language, that is in line with the expectations of the Christian community.

Okay, let's flesh out some other issues in Bible translation. So, some other things to consider when you're doing Bible translation. And this question of what style do the people want? It's not always clear on the front end the style that they want.

In one place, they were doing some research in this language in Tanzania ahead of time, and they said, well, let's take the Bible in Swahili, and there are three different versions in Swahili, and they translated a passage of scripture into the local language,

modeling after the first one, which is a literal Swahili translation from the English. The second one was moderately communicative, and the third one was like a free translation in English and a free translation in Swahili, and then they did three different local language paragraphs. One was literal, one was less literal, and one was more of a free translation.

And so, they asked the people which one they could understand the best? And they said, well, the third one. They asked which one they liked the best. And they said, the literal one. And they said, well, that's interesting.

Why is that? And they said, well, when we sit in church, they read us the Bible in Swahili, and we can't understand it at all. And so, we figured that's what it's supposed to be. They assumed that the Bible was supposed to be obtuse and not communicating.

So what do you do in that kind of situation? And this is what happens when we're in a situation where we're not sure what people want. We start the translation process, and maybe we produce something that's more literal and something that is more communicative and say, which one best suits your people? Which one best suits your Christian community? And then they start saying, well, although we get what the first one is saying, the second one meets our needs better. In southern Tanzania, we were working in two languages.

One was the Sangu language, and one was the Wangji language. The Sangu people had not had the church for very long. The church was only about 20 years old, and a lot of people were still not Christians in that group.

And so, they said, we want a translation for our people that's a bit more communicative, so we can then draw them in with a language that they're familiar with that has less stumbling blocks to them understanding the scriptures. The Wangji people, on the other hand, had had the church for 70, 80, up to 100 years. The people were well-versed in the scriptures.

They were familiar with the Swahili Bible, and they said we're okay if it is a little closer to the Swahili, which we know is closer to the literal version of the English. And so two different translations for two different people to two different people groups, depending on what they wanted. Another thing that we always need to take into consideration is, is there a Bible in the existing major language? In Tanzania, in East Africa, that language is Swahili.

Why is this important? It's important because people will compare the translation to the existing Bible. And if they say, oh, this is so different from the Bible that we've come to know and love, they might reject it for that very reason. Again, this idea of acceptability is coming into play here.

So, as you're translating, how much similarity do you retain from a Bible that people are familiar with? And this trend was in America in the 1950s with the King James Bible. You can't change the King James Bible. This is God's Word.

But then people said, yeah, but we really don't understand the King James. So there was an issue there. So, is there an existing Bible and is there enough respect of that existing Bible that then somehow impacts the way that you need to translate? Another thing that we keep in mind is whether there is another major religion that is dominant in that country. It could be Islam.

It could be Buddhism. It could be Hinduism. And those major religions often have a major set of religious literature.

That religious literature may not even be readable to the average person, but it's this high literary level, this high standard of language, and even specific terms are religious terms. And so they're expecting something of this high level. And if you don't produce something of that level, that could have a great impact.

One of my colleagues was working in Central Asia in this one country, and he was working in language A. In language B, the Bible was written by a different Bible agency, not Wycliffe. And they did a meaning-based translation. So, they completed the whole Bible, and the people in the community said, we don't like this.

This is written for children. We are not children. This is too explanatory.

This is not what a religious book should look like. And so, they took boxes of the translated book to the office of this Bible agency, piled them up, and set them on fire. They burned them.

And my friend was talking to his translation team, the Christians doing the translation with him, and they said, we don't want our Bible burned. Help us to make that bridge between this high language and understandability. And sometimes there's no other way other than rewording it and making it completely different, because that's what the language requires, to make it something that makes at least some sense.

So, we struggle with this. We have to find that balance. We have to find that middle ground, that happy medium.

So, we take all of these things into account when we're doing translation. Another thing that we take into account is, who is the target audience? Who are you writing this for? And who you're writing it for then dictates how we word things. So, if you

think of it that every written text has a certain voice to it, everything that you write has a voice.

The author has his or her voice that they then pour into the text that they write. So what are we aiming at, and who is the target audience? There is no universal target audience. It's up to each individual community.

As a general rule of thumb, as a general principle, typically, we're trying to write for adults who are somewhere in the range of 25 to 45 years old. If you try to retain the old language of people older than 45 years old, you'll get something that's difficult to read; maybe the vocabulary is not known by the people, and they won't read it. If it's too simple, then people who are in their 20s and 30s will say this is for children. We don't like it.

And so, by 25 a person is basically an adult, and oftentimes married, oftentimes with children. And so that cognitive process has solidified in their minds, and they understand the language on the level of most adults. And so we try to hit that sweet spot of 25 to 45-year-olds.

So, within the culture, who is our target audience? Is it non-Christians? Is it everybody? Is it Christians? Again, we can't say universally it should be this or that. But typically, it's for the people in the church. God spoke to Abraham and Abraham's people.

God spoke to Moses and gave the law to Moses for Moses and the people. And so the Bible has always been something for the church. Now, God didn't give the Bible to the Philistines, or he didn't give it to the Bible to the Philistines and the Amorites and the Jebusites and all these other ites, right? No.

He gave it to the Christian, the believing community. So, in the Old Testament, they were not Christian, but we can say that they were the believing community. And so typically, the Bible is translated for the believing community.

What about in a place where the scriptures have never been? I worked in one of those. Who do we translate for in that case? We translate for Christian believing people or people who will come to believe in Christ. And from a missiological perspective as a missionary, and my training as a missionary in college, both on the undergrad level and the grad level, we do not change the message depending on the people so that we can then win them over.

We keep the message the way the message is in the scriptures, and we retain the integrity of the scriptures while at the same time communicating the truth of the gospel. Will the gospel be offensive? Yes. Was Jesus' words offensive to the people of his day? Yeah.

Was it the truth? Yes. How do we strike that balance? Something to keep in mind. But typically, we translate it for the Christian believing community or people who will in the future be the church.

What about things like footnotes? What about things like cross-references? What about things like book introductions? What about glossaries? We call all those things paratextual material as opposed to the text itself. Should we even put those in, and why should we put those in? Oftentimes, the pastors from these different language groups have been working in a language like in Swahili, and what we found from the pastors in Tanzania was they used the Swahili, but it really doesn't sing to their hearts. It really doesn't make that deep impact.

But then when we provide the translation in their language, and we include footnotes, and we include cross-references and glossary and introductions, they sit there and they say, I never realized all this was in the Bible. This is great. And the people in the pews probably don't take time to read that.

So what are we doing? We're providing the scriptures for the pastors to get this deeper understanding of the scriptures, which then relates to how they communicate in the pulpit and their sermons and their messages, and the pastors are telling us, this is great. My preaching has just taken off, and it has such greater impact now because I have a greater understanding of the scriptures. And so in some places, sure, we wanted to speak to the average person in the pew, but the person who ends up using it most initially can be the pastor.

And so, we're translating for the pastors in that regard. So, we have to keep all this in balance. And again, there's no one-size-fits-all.

There's no one thing that has to be this way in every context. It just depends on who you're translating for, who you're translating with, what is the Christian community, and again, the whole question is, what do they want? Okay, so talking about interlingual. Interlingual.

You just say it in a different way, right? It's easy. All right? Here we go. So we have these sentences.

These are sentences that might be said by a medical person. And let's pretend that you are a verbal interpreter, and the person that you're interpreting for is an eight-year-old American child. Okay? So, the medical person says each sentence, and then you have to rephrase that sentence in a split second and say just a sentence, not an explanation.

You can't do a paragraph. Say that sentence in a different way for the child. Okay? So if we look back at the sentences just for a second, what about the first one? Your doctor recommends you follow a low-fat diet.

How might you say that? What might be hard for an eight-year-old to understand? One would be the verb to follow. Usually, you follow someone that's in front of you, or something that's in front of you. Or you follow instructions.

But following a diet is a weird kind of way to say it. Recommends, the child might get it. Suggests, or wants to, he wants you to, or whatever.

Okay? Or she wants you to. Great. So, following, you have to use a different word.

Low-fat diet. By the way, this is an actual set of sentences I give my students, and it's amazing how hard this is. So they come up with, oh, you need to eat more fruits and vegetables.

Great. How many people raise your hand and put tons of butter on your vegetables? Yeah. Is that a low-fat diet? No, it's not.

Okay? Or you have a casserole that's loaded with nice, juicy, oily stuff, and it's got plenty of vegetables in it, but it's not low-fat. What is the basic sense of meaning that we need to communicate in this? And so we have a word, follow, that's a challenge. We have the word low-fat, that's a challenge.

So follow, we might substitute it with the word eat. Your daughter suggests, your doctor suggests that you eat, what? A low-fat diet. That's really abstract.

What do you eat? We eat food. Okay? What should this food be like? Food that doesn't have much fat in it. Is that a low-fat diet? That's probably as close as we can get in one sentence in a quick way.

Okay. What about number four? Some allergy symptoms, include itchy eyes, runny nose, and sneezing. Now, did the medical person say that the patient had those things? No, it's a description, right? So allergy symptoms is one issue, include issue.

And so, allergy symptoms are abstract, but we need to make them a little more concrete for children. And so we might say something like, if a person has allergies to things, and then we go from there, they might have itchy eyes, they might have a runny nose, and they might sneeze, or experience sneezing. And so we're saying the same thing, we're saying it a different way, and we're couching it in a way in terms that a child can understand.

Even number three, seems pretty simple, these drops will cause blurry vision for a couple of hours. These drops that we're going to put into your eyes in a second, will make you see blurry. Again, blurry vision is abstract, you will see blurry, or some form of that, makes more sense to a kid.

Blurry vision is like, whose vision are we talking about? Or even with a kid, I understand the word vision. And so, again, we take into account what? The target audience? We take into account what they need? We take into account how can we best communicate to them? How can we say it in a way that is understandable? Is it simply information like allergy symptoms, or is it an instruction like follow a low fat diet? Both of those are different. One of them is an encouragement, which could be a command or at least an exhortation.

And the second one is straight-up information. And so we communicate differently based on why we're communicating in the first place. So, just by way of review, a translation is transferring the meaning, transferring the meaning and function of a source text in its sociocultural context into a target text that has equivalent, as much as possible, equivalent meaning and function.

That's why we talked about function with those medical sentences. Equivalent meaning and function in the target language sociocultural context. And again, the three types of translation.

Interlingual, between two languages. Intralingual, within one language. And inter-semiotic scripture engagement tools.

Thank you.

This is Dr. George Payton in his teaching on Bible Translation. This is session 2, Introduction to Bible Translation, Part 2.