

Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 12, Challenges in Translation and Communication, Linguistic Issues, Part 1.

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This is Dr. George Payton in his teaching on Bible Translation. This is session 12, Challenges in Translation and Communication, Linguistic Issues, Part 1.

We've been talking about different translation transfer challenges, and we said that they are two basic categories. There are cultural problems with the text that make it difficult to translate, and we had examples of that.

There are also language or linguistic challenges. They're just the nature of the language is just hard because they don't line up. They don't work the same way, and they have different features grammatically, semantically, so we have to make adjustments in order to communicate the meaning.

And again, we want this meaning to come across well. So, the first figurative language or linguistic issue that we're going to deal with is idioms. And we ask, why is it so hard to translate idioms? Well, idioms are figurative language.

And because it's figurative, that's the opposite of literal. So, you can't take idioms literally. Breaking down idioms can be hard, especially when you see one in another language.

It can be difficult to understand. Another thing is that idioms are non-compositional. You can't add up this word plus this word plus this word plus this word and have the meaning of each of those words, and then you understand the meaning of the whole thing.

For example, if you say he blew his top, just try translating the word he into another language, and then blew into another language, and then his into another language, and then top into that language. Now, even in English, you can't get the meaning of he blew his top by understanding the meaning of each word. So, it's not compositional.

You can't add 1 plus 1 plus 1 plus 1 equals 4. So, it's not a sum of its parts. And sometimes, it's even hard to recognize in another language that this is indeed figurative language. Another thing about it is that it is very conceptual.

You imagine this word picture that comes to you, and then you try to relate it to what you know, and it's a part of this shared knowledge that people have together in

the same culture, the same worldview. All the speakers of the language will use those words and those expressions in the same way, and so they share all that knowledge, and it's very conceptual. And it's language-specific.

An idiom in one language cannot necessarily be said the same way in another language. If you try to say it literally, it often doesn't make sense. Okay, so here are some examples of English idioms.

To spread the news. We spread the news. We spread butter on bread.

Okay, what is he driving at? What does that mean? He's not in the car. He's trying to make a point, and you're trying to figure out what he's trying to say. Driving me crazy.

You drive a car, and you drive somebody crazy. In fact, my driving drives my wife crazy. All right.

A moth ate a hole in my shirt. That makes sense, doesn't it? A moth is on your shirt, and there's a hole in it. How can you eat something that's not there? A hole is something that's empty.

How can it eat something that's not there? That doesn't translate, and the missionary lady tries to translate that into Swahili literally, and the person goes, I have no idea what she just said. It makes no sense in Swahili. Break the silence.

What does that mean? There was silence, and then somebody said something, and there was no longer silence. The storm blew over. That's probably almost literal.

The wind blew past us, and it blew over, but we don't say over what. We just say it blew over. Okay, the conflict blew over.

Here again, we have conflict as an inanimate thing. It's actually a concept that's based on things that people did, and it blew over in the same way that the storm blew over. Wait a second.

Idioms, okay. Here's some more: On the ball.

He's really on the ball today. Try to translate that into a different language. If you know Spanish, try to say some of these things in Spanish, or if you know another language, try it.

I'll give you a ring. That may not be used as much today, but that used to mean I will call you, rather than I will give you a ring like I'm proposing to you, and then the guy's

down on one knee, and all that stuff that we talked about in that other session. Hit me up.

It's a common phrase today. It means what? It means contact me. Hit me up.

Text. Phone call. Probably text because people don't like even speaking to each other today.

Maybe. I don't know. Hit me up.

Shoot him an email. Sing a number. A number of what? No, that means sing a song.

And so, number is in the musical world another word for or synonym to songs. We'll sing a song. Take it from the top.

Means start over again from the beginning. I'm feeling down. Again, if you try to translate that literally into another language, I am feeling right.

Bad, sad, whatever. You'd probably use a different word. He's down for it.

Does that mean he's depressed? No, that means he's happy to comply or happy to do or happy to agree to whatever it is. So, you see, all of these things we use them every day. We use them so much that we don't even realize that we're saying it.

So why do we use idioms? They're fun. If you come up with a really good idiom, it's a lot of fun, and it makes the language rich. And vivid.

You get this word picture, especially if you use it with a comparison. It just makes the language a lot more lively.

It makes language more interesting. It's more interesting to talk to people, and they get and you say the funniest things, or they say funny things and use these idioms. It adds to the richness of the language, and it's more interesting.

And then, with all of these idioms, there's some connection to the real world and the real things that people do. For example, if I say Watch out, dude. You're skating on thin ice.

That's an idiom, which means you're in a precariously dangerous situation. If you continue, things are going to go bad.

But that is rooted in what? Reality. Ice skating. And you don't get this from the skating rink, okay? For two reasons.

One, there is no thin ice at the skating rink. And number two, there's nothing beneath the ice except concrete. What about when you're in a lake? And you're skating, and you're on the edge, and the ice isn't as thick.

And if you continue the ice is too thin to support your weight and you will fall in. You're skating on thin ice. Based in some kind of real situation.

As we said the other day, we use the expression step up to the plate. That means it's your turn. Get up there and be a man and do the job, right? It comes from baseball, where you actually step up to the plate.

And if you're not willing to be close enough to the plate, how can you hit the ball, right? So, it's based in a real situation in our culture. And so a lot of these things are cultural, and they're connected to our culture through the language. It reveals what we think of the world.

It reveals how we perceive the world. And you see that through the words that we use. So, what about idioms in other languages? What do they look like? I'm going to give you some idioms in either Orma or Swahili and I'll tell you which one it is.

And then I will tell you what it means. Okay. First one, I have your ear.

I have your ear. I'm listening to you, maybe. I'm paying attention.

Go ahead and say what you want to say. I'm with you. Could means I agree with you.

It doesn't mean any of those. So, I was driving through the Orma area after I had lived there for many years, and then I left, and now I'm on a return trip going through the area. And this old man stopped me and asked me a question.

So, I stopped the car, and we were speaking in Orma. We're going back and forth. And he said, who are you? And I said, do you remember that one white guy who lived in that town? His name was Guyo.

That's me. And he said, Gurkan ke kaba. I have your ear.

Which means, oh, I've heard of you. I've heard of you. Fascinating.

Okay. He got a stove. So, he went down to Home Depot, and they had a sale on ovens and cookers, and he got a stove.

That is not what it means. What does it mean? What do you do with stoves? You cook food, okay? And so, the whole complex of cooking food. I'll tell you, single guys, when I was single, I didn't like to cook food.

Actually, when my wife's away, even if she's gone all day long, okay, well, let's just say I'm not cooking a whole lot, okay? But when she comes back, she makes a nice meal, man. It means he got married. The stove is a figure for the lady in the kitchen at the stove who's making him food.

He got a stove. This is the real Swahili expression, and it's not meant to be derogatory toward women. In fact, a lot of African women take pride and joy in being the one who provides food for their family.

My wife and I were at a friend's house, and I was talking to my friend, and my wife was talking to his wife. And then I go, oh, my wife's talking to your wife. Let's go meet them.

And then the woman said to my wife, referring to her own husband, this is the man that I cook for. That was her pride. She's the food provider for the family.

She took that as part of her identity. So, he got a stove, which means he got married. I know it's sorry, ladies, please.

I'm sorry, but I'm just using that as an example of an idiom. Okay, be eyes. Piga macho, or ue macho.

Ue macho, be eyes, is in a well-known Christian song. Un te ule, ue macho. Christian person, be on the alert.

Be aware. Be aware of maybe bad influences around you. Be aware of things that people are doing.

Be aware. Be on the watch for Jesus, perhaps. Be aware.

Ue macho, be eyes. You see how you, there's no way that you can get that unless you know the language. All right.

Hit picture, piga picha. Piga picha means you go like this, and you go click. You take a picture.

We take them, and they hit them. The same thing is you're snapping a photograph, okay? Piga, or sorry, piga picha is how you say it in Swahili. Piga simu.

Simu means phone. What do you do when you hit the phone? You, you make a call. So, you hit the phone means you make a phone call.

Hit iron. Iron is the iron that you iron your clothes with. Hit iron means iron your clothes.

Kupi kapasi. I'm ironing my clothes. Some of those are more obvious, some of them are less.

But you see the word hit is used in several different ways, and it doesn't mean make physical contact. Okay. So, be eyes means beyond the alert.

Piga macho. I was driving with a friend in downtown Nairobi, and we were looking for a particular store that neither one of us knew where it was. But he said, you know, I think it's on this one street.

Let's go over there. So, he's driving, and I'm in the passenger seat, and he says, we need to find out where the store is. Piga macho.

Look around. Try to find it. See where it is.

Different than uwe macho. May you be on the alert is the first one, and may you look around intently and help me to find this in a second. Okay.

Hear hunger. To hear hunger means to feel hungry, and they use the word hear when it comes to certain body feelings or sensations. So if you say, I am thirsty, you would say, I hear thirst.

Nasikia, cue. I hear hunger. Nasikia, cue.

Nasikia means hear. So, you can actually hear sounds, literally. But then you think, why do they say it like that? So, the technical answer to that is because.

The extended technical answer for that is because that's the way it is. And there is no answer. I can't tell you.

No one else can either. Why do they say that? That's just how it is. Another one.

He doesn't have opportunity. Now, this is an Orma expression that they borrow the word opportunity from Swahili. Nafasi.

And if they say Nafasi hinkabu, he doesn't have nafasi, it means he's sick. He's sick. Kenyans from another tribe, they hear that and they have no idea what that means.

He doesn't have opportunity to do what? Well, he doesn't feel well. He is in spirit. Lubujir.

It's an Orma expression. It means he's really, really sick and he's just about to die. So lubu can mean spirit.

Lubu can mean life. Lubu can mean death. So, depending on how it's used, but lubujir means he's in, quote-unquote, in death or in spirit.

It means he's just about ready to die. Now part of the problem is that languages have idiomatic speech that is not actually idioms. So, we're talking about idiomatic language.

Wash up the dishes. You ever heard that expression? Your mom tells you, wash up the dishes afterwards. Clean up the table.

Okay, why do we have that word up in there? Try to translate that literally, keeping the word up in it will not make sense. Oshajuvyombo. Wash up the dishes.

Yeah, it doesn't make sense. So that's an idiomatic expression, but not necessarily an idiom. We would say, well, that's just how we talk.

That's just the verb, wash up. Then you have this one: wash up before dinner. What does that mean? I mean, my mom told us that when we were kids all the time.

It means what? Wash your hands before you go to dinner. A friend of mine, an American, invited some British people over for dinner. This was in Nairobi.

So British colleagues, American colleagues, Americans invited the British over for dinner. And the American people said, would you like to wash up before? Would you like to wash up? Which wash-up did the British people interpret? The first one. They interpreted the Americans to say when the dinner's over, would you like to help do the dishes? And the Americans meant what? Would you like to wash your hands? We have two cultures separated by a common language.

Americans and British people. Okay, washing up can mean two different things. And they never use washing up to mean wash your hands.

They would actually say wash your hands. Would you like to wash your hands? Finish up the food. That means eating the rest of it, right? Then we have this one.

She put away the leftovers. There are two interpretations of that expression. One would be, put them in Tupperware, into the fridge.

The other means she can really put it away if she's eating it. So did you hear about the woman of girth in the kitchen? No, she could really put away the leftovers. All right, so putting away can have more than one meaning.

At least in some people's dialect. She's on the phone. Again, it's not an idiom, but she's not physically on top of the phone.

That's just how we say she's on the phone. And so, what they say is in Swahili, they'll say, she's talking on the phone. Rather than literally on the phone.

Okay. Pick up something at the store. That means you go to the store, and you go like this.

And you pick something up. So, I've just picked up my phone, right? They don't say that in other languages. This is an idiomatic expression without being an idiom.

It means go and buy that thing at the store that we want. Another one, take a seat. Where do you want me to take it? Again, I am taking these things literally.

Does anyone, by the way, know who Amelia Bedelia is? And this children's series called Amelia Bedelia? Well, Amelia Bedelia's author and it's a children's book, and it has drawings and stuff. It's an illustrated series. And Amelia Bedelia takes idioms literally.

And the whole book is all about her taking things literally when they weren't meant to be literally. And it's hilarious. So, she's a maid at this one house and they tell her, we're going out for the evening.

Here are the decorations. Trim the tree. And so, she goes and gets hedge clippers, and she cuts the tree, and it's a nice and trim like this.

And they come back, and they go, what have you done? She goes, well, I trimmed the tree just like you said. Trim means what? Decorate. All right.

Pick your seat. Is that choose, select, pick the seat you want to sit in? Okay. So these are the same ones.

Idiomatic language in Swahili. So alifika nyumayangu, literally, he arrived my back. It means he arrived after me or behind me or he came up after me.

So it's actually a time thing. But it's literally my back. Alitsimama mbeleyake.

She stood front his. Which means she stood in front of him. And in Hebrew they have before the Lord.

And in the New Testament, someone fell down before Jesus. It means in front of. This is the same kind of expression.

It sounds weird in English to say before. We would say in front of. But in Swahili, it's almost a direct translation of the Greek or the Hebrew.

Because they use the same words in the same way. Or similar words in similar ways. Wali ongea juyake.

Ju means up or above. Wali ongea means they talked. They talked.

And then yake means his. They talked up his. They talked about him.

So, if you say they talked about this issue, you could say they talked juya, this thing. But when it's a person, that ya becomes his or her. They talked up his.

They talked about. So ju can mean about. Ndege aleyruka juyake.

The bird jumped up his. It's either the bird flew above him. Above slash over.

Or it means the bird landed on him. Do you remember in Genesis 1-2? The water was covered everywhere, and the spirit of the Lord was hovering. Al p'nei hamayim.

Al, what does that mean? P'nei manayim means on the face of the waters. Literally the face of the waters. What does the al mean? It can mean over.

Or it can mean on the surface of the waters. It can mean either one in Hebrew. And Hebrew is vague.

And so, we're translating Genesis. What do I say? That the spirit of the Lord was above the waters or on the surface of the waters. And so, we said it literally it walked.

The spirit walked on the waters rather than over or above. Little words like this and you think, well, this should be easy to translate. And you just try, and it doesn't work.

It doesn't communicate. Okay, so what do we do with these idioms? First of all, we have to break the idiom down, and we have to understand it. Here's an idiom.

Mary kept all these things in her heart. Talking about Jesus and all the praises that people gave of Jesus. And so what did she do? She pondered them.

She thought about them. She meditated on them. Every now and then, when she's doing something, it comes to mind.

And she has this warm feeling in her heart. So, we've broken it down. We understand it.

Okay, first option. Go ahead and translate it literally into this other language. First of all does that language have the idiom? Whether they would understand it or not is one question.

But do they have the idiom? For example, we have this idiom in Genesis. Genesis 24-63. The servant of Abraham went up and got a wife for Isaac.

Wife is Rebecca. They're coming back in this caravan, and Isaac is out walking in the fields. Went out to meditate in the field.

He lifted his eyes, and behold, camels were coming. What is the idiom in this sentence? Lifted his eyes. He didn't do it literally.

Again, idioms are not literal. What does that mean? It means he was here. He's kind of walking around like this.

And he looked forward ahead of himself. So, we were trying to translate this into the Pocomo language. And I was there to give them consultant advice.

And they had this expression. Isaac went out and lifted up his eyes. And I said, okay guys, yeah, that's pretty much a Hebrew idiom.

And so how would you normally say that in your language? And they said he lifted up his eyes. That is exactly the same idiom, and it's used exactly the same way. And I said, are you guys the 13th lost tribe? You know the 12 lost tribes.

Now you have 13. So, these are the same exact way. And so there was no change to be made at all.

We had the same expression in Orma. And the passage that I'm thinking of is when Abraham was sitting in his tent and the three angels came to see him. He lifted his eyes, and behold, three men were coming.

And so, we said, okay, it doesn't mean he lifted his eyes. How do we break down this idiom? And I say, well, okay, he looked up. And my Orma translator translated my words literally into Orma.

So, one of the things that we normally do is we try to ask people from the community to come and listen to what we've translated. And then you can help us and you can tell us what this means to you. So, I said, read that sentence.

So, my translator read the sentence. Abraham looked up and saw three people coming. And I said, excuse me, friend, can you do what Abraham did? According to what the Orma sentence is.

And he went like this. And I said, why would he do that? And they said, well, maybe they were spirit beings that were flying and coming down and saying, oh my gosh, we have a problem. And so, we had to come up with an Orma expression that had nothing to do with lifting.

And how would you say that? And we thought about the body actions. He was sleeping, maybe in front of his tent. And he went like that.

And they had an expression. He lifted his head and saw them coming. So does it have an idiom? You can translate it literally.

So, we had this expression. Mary kept all these things in her heart. In the Sabbat language, they do have this idiom.

The exact same idiom, word for word. And it means bitter or resentful. To keep something in your heart means bitter or resentful.

So, this is what the translation into Sabbat said. Mary was resentful about all these things. Is that really what we want to say? No, it's not.

Here's an example of where literal brings the wrong meaning. Literal can sometimes bring the absolute wrong meaning. So, therefore, we should not do it literally as a standard practice.

OK, here's another one. In Jonah 4:11, God is talking to Jonah. And God is justifying what he did.

And he says, should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, as well as many animals? So, one of my colleagues working with me on the Orma language and his translation team that he was working with translated this literally because Orma has this expression. Not knowing your right hand from your left. That's an Orma expression.

Great. So, I went down there. Maybe they're talking about this.

And so, we had some local people come in. And I asked this one guy, who are these people who don't know their right hand from their left? And he said, oh, they're mentally challenged. Sorry, are there really 120,000 mentally challenged people in Nineveh? Probably not.

So, we had to pick a different word. So, here again, literal was wrong. It gave you the incorrect meaning.

So, we had to come up with something else. They don't know the right from the wrong, rather than right from the left.

So,, not knowing right from wrong is at least better than giving the wrong meaning. Interestingly enough, if you look at the different versions, they say different things about who this could be. One of them, the Good News translation, says children.

Shouldn't I have compassion for 120 children? I think from my studies and looking at all the commentaries, that's the only version that goes in that direction. It probably does not mean children. Probably means all the people there.

And most commentators believe 120,000 was the population of Nineveh. Rather than there being that many children, how many adults, it would be who knows how many people. OK, so we need to know that this is an idiom.

And we need to know what the idiom means. And then we need to translate it appropriately. So, the first option, translate it literally, works if you already have that idiom in the language.

And it means the same thing. OK, so we had this one. How did they handle this one? Sorry.

In Sebald language, keeping things in her heart means she's bitter or resentful. So, we said, OK, well, how can you translate it and keep that same meaning? And they said Mary kept all these things in her throat: different body parts, same meaning.

One thing that we need to keep in mind with idioms is to be especially careful when translating idioms that use body parts. Because chances are the body parts that are used in one language don't match the expression of body parts used in another language. And so, you can't use heart in other languages when conveying emotions.

In Orma, they say stomach. He has a bad stomach, which means he's upset. So, heart in Hebrew, stomach in other languages, liver in other languages.

So, watch out for using body parts. Body parts don't always communicate. In fact, often don't communicate.

OK, sometimes you just have to say it straight up. You break down the meaning and say it without any kind of figurative language. For example, in Acts 11:22, this news reached the ears of the church.

So, what does that mean? Obviously, it's not a church building that has a bunch of ears coming out of it. But that is a strange thing that comes to mind. So, what did they do? This news reached the church.

Again, this is news traveling. So, it's kind of like an anthropomorphism that news is doing something that people do. The people in the church heard this news.

Means the same thing. Breaking down the figurative language reduces the possibility of misunderstanding. OK, another one.

Those who sought the child's life were dead. Seeking the child's life is the idiom. This is about Herod and Herod's soldiers trying to find Jesus.

And they looked for him for some time. And then those people died. And then, it was time for them to come back from Egypt.

And it says in Matthew, those who sought the child's life. How can we say that in a straight-up way? One way, those who wanted to kill the child were dead. This is the one that we got in a previous discussion.

To lift up the name of the descendant on his inheritance. That's what happens when you have a brother who marries his deceased brother's wife. So, the brother marries his sister-in-law.

She has a son. That son is then called after his original father, the father who had passed away. And on his inheritance is another strange expression.

So, these are two strange expressions put together into one. To preserve the name of the deceased on or with his property. The things that someone might inherit, particularly land.

Land was really, really important. So rather than saying lift up the name, preserve the name, rather than saying on his inheritance, on his property.

OK. So, summary of how to translate idioms. Use an idiom if you can because it really does add to the richness of the text and makes it more interesting.

And it makes it more vivid for the readers, of this translation in the other language. Translate the idiom literally if you can.

If and only if it means the same thing in both languages, translate it using another idiom that has the same meaning. Like when we said in the Sabbath language, she kept all these things in her heart.

It was the one in the Bible. They said she kept these things in her throat. And it meant the same thing.

So, you can use an idiom for an idiom. And the last thing is. Break it down and say it literally.

So, these are just some best practices. These are not rules. What you do is you have this set of tools in your toolbox and then you apply it in the situation depending on the language, depending on the words, depending on the context of both.

Thank you.

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