

Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 15, Challenges in Translation and Communication, Linguistic Issues, Unknown Ideas

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Now I would like to talk about another translation challenge.

It's kind of the combination between language and culture. It's how to translate unknown ideas. An unknown idea, they are things and concepts that are in the Bible that don't necessarily exist in another culture.

Because of this problem, it's challenging to know how to effectively communicate them if this concept or if this thing, this object, doesn't occur or doesn't exist in the target language. So, before such terms can be translated, we need to discover what this word means and maybe it has more than one meaning. And so, what are these meanings in the target language and in the target culture? And so, we need to have a process of finding out what the term means.

This can be an in-depth process. It can involve a lot of research on both sides. It involves looking at the verses where the word occurs in the Bible, finding out the different senses, and then determining what sense triggers one particular verse as opposed to another.

And remember, we always say words are defined specifically in the context where they occur. You can't say it always means one thing over all the senses. For example, if we think of the word house, the house, the word house in Hebrew has been then translated to Greek, and we have the house of David.

It means the family of David. You have the house of Israel. That means the whole nation of Israel.

In Acts 16, the Philippian jailer, he and his house were saved. So, what does house mean in that context? That means his family, his servants, everybody that was there. So that's household.

And so, each of those has a different sense to it. And so, we need to keep that in mind as we're researching these words in the Greek and Hebrew. We need to realize if they have different senses, we need to know when one is triggered as opposed to another.

Here are some examples of unknown ideas or concepts that we find in the Bible. So, plants and animals, types of trees, fruit, garden crops, plants, sheep, goats, camel, donkeys, horses, bears, lions, and all kinds of birds. That's one group.

Geographical formations include lakes, oceans, seas, mountains, deserts, forests, and wilderness areas. How do you translate desert for people who live in the jungle, for example? This is why these are challenging. Weather or seasons, snow, ice, winter, summer.

Like I said, in Orma, we had three seasons: hot, hotter, and hottest. But actually, in Kenya, you have a dry season, and then it rains for a short period of time. And then you have a dry season, and then it rains for a longer period of time.

So, we call it the long rains and the long dry season, the short rains and the short dry season. And that's the cycle that we find in East Africa. What do you do when you have snow and ice and winter and all that stuff? Weights and measures, cubit, stadia, Sabbath walk, Omer.

Gosh, reading the book of Ruth, when Ruth and Boaz met at night. And then what it says is, take off your shawl, and I'll give you some grain. And it says he measured six for her.

It doesn't say six what? We don't know if it's six Omer's or if it's six, is it lfa? Six what? We don't know. So, when they were at the wedding at Kana, Mary said to Jesus, they have no wine. And Jesus said it's not my time yet.

She says, do whatever he tells you to do to the servants. And then he tells the servants, okay, fill up these six stone water jars. And then it gives us an amount.

And then we have to figure out how do you handle that. Weights and measures. All right, money, shekel, denarius, talent. Talent is also a measure of weight.

You have common culture things, scales to weigh things, a plow, a millstone boat, a sail rudder, a shield, an arrow, and a helmet. And then you have royalty, king, queen, throne. You have centurions, you have governors, you have army.

You have religious terms, priest, temple, Levite, all those. Some other unknown concepts are abstract concepts like hope, faith, holiness, and even the word God. So, determining the meaning involves understanding the cultural domain that the term belongs to.

And each sense belongs to a different domain. Just like we said, when you have one sense of house, if you say they went to Peter's oikos, that's the building where he lived. So, that's one relational frame of reference.

If you say the house of David, that's a different frame of reference. So, each sense of the word triggers a different picture, a different frame of reference. And then once the meaning of the term is understood, the next process is to investigate what possible words we could have in this target language that we could then draw from.

We want to make sure that there's enough semantic overlap and that there are enough elements of meaning on this side on the target language that we found in the source text word. And there are no set ways to translate. And what we're going to give you is suggested principles or best practices, things that you can apply when you're trying to translate.

Okay, so one of the ways is use a descriptive phrase. So, for synagogue, you might use house of prayer. Temple and synagogue, there's a lot of similarity between temple and synagogue.

But the unique thing about the temple is that's where they sacrificed animals and nowhere else in the whole nation of Israel. Yeah, we had this trouble when we tried to translate yeast into Orma. And so, we came up with a powder that makes bread swell.

Eventually, we talked to people, and they said, well, we just brought this Swahili word, Hamira. So, then we said, Hamira. Now, when you're thinking about translating these words, remember the concept that language is like water that runs downhill.

It takes the path of least resistance to get to the bottom. So, whatever is easiest for people to use, that's what they will probably end up using. So, if you come up with this long explanation, they'll probably just go. Why don't we just borrow a word from Swahili and be done with it? Sorry, why don't we borrow a word from Swahili and be done with it? Okay, and you don't want to have a long-expression to describe this thing, especially if it's used over and over and over.

The second thing is we try to use a generic term if there's no specific term in your language. So, what kind of tree did Zacchaeus climb up? He climbed up a sycamore tree. Does anyone even know really what a sycamore tree is? And does it really matter the kind of tree that he climbed into? As far as communicating the message, probably not.

And so, if your language doesn't have the word sycamore tree, then what did he do? He climbed a tree. Zacchaeus climbed a tree. We're not taking things away from the meaning of the scriptures.

We had the same trouble in Ormah when we were doing Genesis 1, and it says all the trees with seeds in them and plants and all these other things, we have one word for tree. We don't have even a word for plant. We don't have a word for bushes.

We just had to say a tree. For big, for small. That's all we had.

So, we just used the general word tree. Alright, use a specific term instead of a general term. So, if they have a problem having a generic word, then you're forced to choose one of the words in that semantic domain.

And so in Mark 6:39, when Jesus fed the 5,000, he had them sit down in groups on the green grass. And the people in Papua New Guinea were talking to the translation consultant, and they said, so what kind of grass was it? I don't know. Why does that matter? Well, we don't have a word for grass.

We have this kind of grass and this kind of grass. We have about 10 or 15 different kinds of grass. Well, I don't know.

Well, what did it look like? What did it feel like? Well, it was green, which means it was fresh. It probably rained recently, so it was probably soft to sit on. They didn't want to choose grass that meant grass that had thorns in it, because you sit down on it and you're going, why would Jesus do that? He wouldn't.

So, they had to choose a word among their 10 or 15 words. They had to choose one word that meant a kind of grass that would be comfortable to sit on. So that's one of the ways to do that.

Again, remember what we said in another talk? Sometimes, in translation, we try to get as close as we can, but sometimes, close has to be good enough. We're not taking anything away from what Jesus did here. It's not ruining the meaning of the passage.

We're constrained by the linguistic limitations of the language. Another thing is, another option is to use something similar if they don't have that word in their language. So, if you go to Papua New Guinea and the devil prowls around like a lion.

Sorry, what's a lion? We don't have lions. Therefore, what do you say? He prowls around like a dangerous animal. And if you say dangerous animal, it usually means an animal that attacks other things, including people.

When you use comparisons, we have a little bit more latitude because it's a comparison that tries to paint a word picture. And so, in Revelation, the phrase white as snow was used, referring to Jesus when he was shining really bright. In Orma, they

would say white as milk because that's something that everybody knows that's white, and that's the standard for whiteness, something.

So, you use something that's really white in that culture. Okay, use a word from another language. So, in Bantu languages in East Africa, there is no generic word for God.

They have ancestral spirits, then they have the gods of certain places, and in one language that we were dealing with in East Africa, they worshipped the turtle, the river, the sun, things like that. And each clan had a different name for the god that they worshipped or for the deity that they worshipped. And I talked to the language team, and I said, so what is your word for God here? Oh, it's the word for the thing that we worship.

And I said I'm not really comfortable with that. And there was another translation team with us, and they said, well, we have the same problem in our language, so what do you do? The Swahili word for God is mungu. And even though these other cultures may or may not speak Swahili, they at least knew the word because of the spread of Christianity in East Africa.

So, even though Swahili wasn't the main language, they still knew what mungu meant. And they knew that mungu meant the high god, and not any other god. And so in order to avoid saying that God is a turtle or God is the river that you worship, they used mungu instead, and then that cleared away all the ambiguities.

But they had to borrow a word from another language in order to do that. Okay, other examples of borrowing words from another language. Okay, Kinga language in Tanzania, we worked with them, and they live in the mountains.

And in that mountain region, the largest body of water that they have is a stream or a river. So, they don't know what any large body of water is. They don't have a word for it in their language.

Fortunately, just outside the Kinga area, there's this big lake, and they're the people that live on the lake and do fishing. So they knew what a lake was because they had seen it. They didn't have a word for it in their language, but they knew what it was.

So, they ended up borrowing the word for lake from that other language. Could they have done it in Swahili? Yes. But this other language was closer to them and had some other similarities to it, so it made more sense.

And it sounded less foreign because everyone knew that word, because this other language was right next door, and they knew each other's language and vocabulary. Okay, so it's really hard to find a good way to render or a good way to express

synagogue, Pharisees, Sadducees, places of names. The word baptism is very, very challenging.

Can we translate the meaning? Dunk into water or dunk? Immerse? What about when we're baptized into Christ? What happens when we're baptized into the Holy Spirit or baptized by the Holy Spirit? So, we see that a word like baptism has all of these religious and spiritual concepts associated with it. And in that, it's very, very difficult to just translate the meaning because you lose all of those other connotations and spiritual meanings. So, Bible tradition, from the time of the first English Bibles till now, Bible tradition, and even in other foreign languages, they tend to transliterate these words from Greek and not even borrow them from English.

Well, in English we use the word baptize, and so it's transliterating these words, borrowing these words, it's easier to transliterate and explain Pharisee than it is to try to come up with a long phrase that explains what a Pharisee is. So, we try to think about how we can best communicate these words. Some more thoughts about borrowing a word from another language. We need to be careful that we don't borrow too much.

Can a Bantu language that's similar to Swahili really borrow a bunch of Swahili words? Sure. But what happens? The translation sounds foreign. This is not us.

This is not our language. And if you're talking about an unreached people group or a people group where there's a lot of non-Christians that have begun reading the Bible, they'll say, this isn't our language. And when they say this isn't our language, what else do they say? We don't want to read this Bible.

So, the whole acceptability thing goes down. And they don't accept the Bible, which means they don't accept the Gospel. And they reject the Gospel because of the language that's used in the translation.

Not necessarily because they disagree with what it teaches, but because of this whole Bible thing, they maybe don't even have books, maybe this is a strange thing all around, but when you translate it, you don't want that to happen. So, we avoid using foreign vocabulary. And in rejecting the Bible and in rejecting the Gospel, really they're rejecting God.

In one sense, we are inhibiting them from having a relationship with God by using too many foreign words that sound strange to them and their language. We want to avoid that. We really need to be careful about bringing in too many foreign words.

And so, option number five is kind of like salt. You sprinkle it in the food, but you don't dump a whole lot in. Six, where do you use a word from the target language and redefine it? So, in Greek they have three words for love, eros, phileo, and agape.

And agape, my understanding from the research that I've been able to do, it wasn't all that common to begin with. It is used in a unique way in the New Testament to mean unconditional love. It didn't necessarily mean that in the Greek of the day, but it was used in the New Testament, Lips of Jesus, Writings of Paul, etc.

And so, it came to take on this meaning of God's agape, which is God doesn't have any favoritism. He doesn't favor Jews over Greeks. He doesn't favor Gentile, Scythian, or free, male or female.

But the gospel is there for all. And so, this whole idea that God has this love for all people is housed in this word agape. And so it has taken on a life of its own outside of what it started as.

And through history, that has happened, and now it's accepted today. Alright, so in Ormond, we had an interesting issue, a problem, when we were translating the book of Genesis. And the issue was this.

We tried to say, how can we communicate that Abraham built an altar and sacrificed? And so, I was told, well, we have this sacred place that we build. And this sacred place, you go in, you pray, animals don't go in there, kids don't go in there. You just go in there, and you pray, and you worship God.

So, I said, maybe we can use that. The problem was Mahala was this little fence. It's about, bigger than this table, but about five feet around.

And you put sticks in the ground, and that's your fence. And it has an opening, and there's no gate on it. And you go in through the opening, and you're in this fenced area, and you sit down.

It's small, but it's a holy place—or a sacred place in some way.

And so, we said, okay, let's try it. But then we put a picture in the back of the book of Genesis that we translated and said, this is what a Mahala looks like. It's a pile of stones, uncut stones, and you sacrifice animals on top of it.

And then you light the firewood that the animal's on, and you burn it to God. They got the concept. They knew about sacrifices.

They knew about burning animals to God. But we retooled and refashioned this word Mahala in a different way. Number seven, create a new word.

You think, well, that's radical. Actually, no, it's not. How many new words have come since the advent of the computer and technology? Database, hard drive, mouse.

We retooled the word mouse to mean mouse. What about text? Texting came with the advent of the mobile phone. And text means a written document.

So, you can still talk about text today. The text in the newspaper said this. But it's taken on the life of its own to mean specifically a message that you communicate via mobile phone to someone else.

What is it called when you use your computer? Email. Another new word. And what does email stand for? Electronic mail shortened to email.

All those new words we've come up with. And then slang words, frenemy, hangry, and all these others. They come up with new slang words every day.

Neologisms sometimes can help to fill the gaps and the concept in the Bible in the target language. Then, you need to fill in what that means with teaching, footnotes, explanations, and such. And the KJV, primarily from the influence of William Tyndale initially, came up with a bunch of new words because they didn't have words.

And so, they came up with Jehovah, Passover, atonement, scapegoat, mercy seat, showbread. And he went against the religious authorities of the day. Instead of doing penance, he actually used the word repentance.

Doing penance means you have to do something to say you're sorry to God and you do these things, whatever it is. But he said repentance is the issue of the heart. You can do that without doing any physical things.

So, he brought that in and that is used. Over time, these things become normal, normative, and even normal outside the church in normal language and normal culture. So, the new words that get introduced into a target language Bible, they can become common through usage by the church, by Christians, but also outside of the church.

Last thing, you can use a combination of these methods, at least even sometimes, initially. But if it's a word that's not used much, then you can use one of these different methodologies. One of the things is to use a descriptive phrase together with a borrowed word.

So, if you use the word synagogue and transliterate it, synagogue and house of prayer, or you have a synagogue in the text, some formation of it, and when you transliterate a word, by the way, it has to fit the sounds that are existing in the language. So, in Swahili they put an l on the end of everything, or some vowel, and so it's sunagogi, synagogue. So you say synagogue A, house of prayer, mahala for orma,

mahala for altar, mahala kama, a place for sacrificing, or a place for sacrificing to God.

So that's one possible combination. Another combination is to use a descriptive word, a descriptive phrase with the neologism, the new word that you came up with. And again, we said you can use footnotes and glossaries.

You can create a Bible booklet and have little pictures there, and this is what a camel looks like for people in Papua New Guinea, and you can show the size and what it looks like. Anything that you can use, glossaries, all of that, can enhance the understanding of the reader so they know what it is that the Bible is talking about. We have to remember that we are doing a very, very radical thing, taking this ancient book over 2,000 years ago and communicating it to a group of people who have no idea what we're talking about.

They have no idea what this God is, who he is, what he does, and why he is doing this. And so, they need as much help as we can give them so that they can understand these things in the Bible. So, there are many options for translating.

This process is done in conjunction with the church, and a lot of forethought goes into it. Sometimes you try it out, and you see, is this something that people understand? Is this comfortable to them? Do the church leaders accept this? Are they using this when they preach sermons? That's a really good, by the way, litmus test, a really good tool for evaluating. Is this being used in the church? What do pastors use when they preach? If it doesn't really work, doesn't really fit, then you all talk together and say, okay, let's think of some different options, some other ways that we can communicate these unknown ideas and concepts. So you translate, but you're continually revisiting some of these issues.

Sometimes, you don't have to revisit; sometimes, you do. Just as you go back and proofread after you've translated the whole New Testament, you're going to proofread the whole thing from start to finish a second time or third time. Same thing with key terms.

Same thing with these unknown ideas. Lastly, so in this presentation we talked about unknown ideas, but we did not cover a lot of other terms that we could have covered. There's just no time.

And it's much more complex. Like what? God, Spirit, Holy, Faith, Angels and Demons, Sanctification, Justification, Propitiation, and the list goes on. The process of translating these means you do a much deeper dive into the world of the Bible, the world of the Hebrews and the Greeks, what those semantic domains are, what the ranges of words that occur together, how you can really understand the interplay between words that are similar that are in the same domain, and then what is the

domain over here that this domain matches up with, and how do we choose words that carry most of the meaning that we want to communicate, or we have to come up with a new word, or we have to have some other way of explaining this concept.

So, that is at least a taste of how we go about translating these unknown ideas, and I hope that this has been a blessing to you. Thank you.

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