Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 4, Translation Theory Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 4, Translation Theory, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt discusses biblical translation theory, exploring the tension between **formal equivalence** (prioritizing the source language's form) and **dynamic equivalence** (prioritizing the receptor language's understanding). It argues that **all translations inherently involve interpretation**, illustrating this with examples of differing translations of the same verses. The lecture also examines **gender-inclusive translations**, debating whether altering masculine pronouns and nouns to be more inclusive improves clarity or distorts the original meaning. Finally, the text emphasizes that **ongoing translation updates are necessary** due to evolving languages.

2. 12 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 4 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).

Mathewson_Hermen_Session04.mp3

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpts on translation theory:

Briefing Document: Translation Theory and Hermeneutics

I. Introduction & Purpose

- The lecture focuses on the crucial role of translation in hermeneutics (the study of interpretation), emphasizing that a good translation is the foundation for sound interpretation.

- It explores the philosophy behind translation, various types of translations, and their implications for understanding the Bible.

- The lecture *does not* endorse any specific translation but rather aims to educate on the principles and philosophies that shape them.

- It also addresses the contemporary topic of gender-inclusive translations.

- Key questions addressed include:

- What constitutes a good translation?

- What principles are used in translation?

- What types of translations exist?

- What role does translation play in hermeneutics?

II. The Process of Translation

- **Source Language vs. Receptor Language:** Translation involves transferring a message from the *source language* (Hebrew and Greek for the Bible) to a *receptor language* (modern-day languages like English).

- **Message as the Core:** The process involves understanding and transferring the message conveyed by the source text.

- **Theories of Translation:Formal Equivalence (Source-Text Focused):**Prioritizes the form, structure, and wording of the original language (Hebrew/Greek).

- Aims to reproduce the source text as closely as possible, even if it results in awkward or less clear phrasing in the receptor language.

- Sometimes sacrifices clarity in the receptor text to preserve the form of the source.

- Examples: NASB (New American Standard Bible), NRSV.

- **Quote:** "The goal is usually to reproduce as closely as possible the language and the structure and the form of the original language. Even if at times it sounds awkward and wooden and stilted in the receptor language..."

- **Dynamic Equivalence (Receptor-Text Focused):**Prioritizes conveying the *message* of the original text in a way that will be understood by modern readers in the receptor language.

- Willing to sacrifice form, structure, and exact wording to communicate the message clearly and effectively.

- Aims to evoke an equivalent emotional, psychological, and intellectual response in modern readers as the original readers would have had.

- Often focuses on understandability and intelligibility in the receptor language.

- Examples: TEV (Today's English Version).

- **Quote:** "The goal is to reproduce the message of the source text, even if not the form and structure, at least to produce the message in a way that will be understood by the modern reader...So the focus is more on the receptor text...Will the modern day reader...as accurately and as closely as possible understand the message of the source text?"

- **Paraphrase:** Goes further than dynamic equivalence, rephrasing the text to convey meaning rather than direct translation, like *The Message* and *The Living Bible*.

- **Spectrum, Not Dichotomy:** Instead of seeing formal and dynamic equivalence as opposing theories, it is more accurate to view them as ends of a spectrum.

- **Impossibility of Complete Literalism:** A completely literal translation is impossible due to inherent differences in languages; they do not completely overlap.

- **Quote:** "...no two languages are identical...no two languages completely overlap...no such thing as a completely literal translation."

- **Wooden Translations Fail:** Striving for a "wooden" or word-for-word translation often results in nonsense and miscommunication because of linguistic differences. Examples used to illustrate this point are:

- A wooden translation of Colossians 3:17 results in "And all what anything if you do in word or in work, all in name of Lord Jesus," which is largely unintelligible. The NIV version is given as contrast which renders the verse as, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

- A wooden translation of Matthew 13:4 is "and into the sow him which on the one had fell by the way," which is nonsensical. The NIV version is given as contrast: "As he was scattering the seed, or as he was sowing the seed, some fell along the path."

III. Key Observations about Translations

- **Every Translation is an Interpretation:** No translation is completely neutral. The selection of words and grammatical structures inherently involves interpretation of the source text and the receptor language.

- **Quote:** "Every translation is an interpretation, period...every translation is a commentary on the biblical text in disguise...it's impossible to produce a translation that is not an interpretation of the biblical text."

- Examples given include choosing an English word to translate the Hebrew word *adam* or understanding the nuances of Greek grammar and their English equivalents.

- **Priority of Spoken Language:** Translations are usually geared towards how the text sounds when read aloud, rather than just its written form. They are intended for the hearer as much as the reader. This can lead to the elimination of potentially offensive words or phrases. (Example: Replacing "ass" with "donkey" in some modern translations).

- **Target Audience:** Translations are often written to be understood by the majority of their intended audience, taking into account factors like reading level and socioeconomic background. (Example: NIV is geared to a 5th/6th grade reading level).

- **Preservation of Foreignness:** Translations should maintain a sense that they are dealing with a foreign text not written in the 21st century. Extreme updates which make the text seem completely contemporary can detract from this.

- **Necessity of New Translations/Updates:** Because languages change, including the meanings of words, new translations and updates are periodically necessary to communicate effectively with contemporary readers. This is particularly true for dynamic equivalent translations. (Example: shift in the meaning of "gay" or "ass").

IV. Gender-Inclusive Translations

- **Gender in Language:** Greek and Hebrew have gender built into the language (masculine, feminine, sometimes neuter), while English largely does not.

- **Masculine Language and Inclusivity:** Greek/Hebrew sometimes use masculine words to refer to both males and females.

- **The Issue:** Should English translations use masculine language (e.g., "man," "he," "him") when the original text refers to all of humanity (male and female)?

- **Gender Inclusive vs. Gender Neutral:Gender-inclusive** translation tries to make it clear when both male and female are intended in the text.

- **Gender-neutral** implies the removal of gender altogether.

- **The Goal:** To avoid misunderstanding and ensure that female readers are not excluded when a text intends to include both genders.

- **Common Changes:** Examples of changes made in some gender-inclusive translations include:

- Replacing "man" with "people" or "human beings" when referring to all of humanity.

- Changing "he" or "him" to "they" or "them" when the context indicates both male and female are being addressed.

- Changing "son" to "sons and daughters" or "children" when appropriate.

- **Context is Key:** Changes are only made where the context clearly intends to include both genders.

- **Evangelical Perspective:** Most evangelicals who support this approach are not trying to push a feminist agenda, but rather striving for clarity and accuracy in representing the meaning of the original text.

- **Examples:**Psalm 1:1, where the 2011 NIV changes "blessed is the man" to "blessed is the one."

- Hebrews 2:6, where the NRSV changes "what is man that you are mindful of him... son of man that you care for him?" to "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals that you care for them?" This example highlights the shift from masculine terminology to language meant to convey the idea of all humanity, based on the context.

- **Not Tampering with the Text:** The goal is not to change the text where the original context refers to a particular gender, but to clarify when inclusive language is intended.

V. Future Discussion Points

- The next session will continue the discussion on gender-inclusive translations.

- It will examine the role translation plays in interpretation.

- It will consider what translation should be used in hermeneutics and interpretation.

VI. Conclusion

The lecture provides a valuable overview of translation theory, highlighting the complexities and nuances involved in transferring meaning from ancient languages to modern ones. It emphasizes that translation is not a neutral act but rather an interpretive process influenced by various factors and philosophical approaches. Understanding these principles is crucial for effective hermeneutics.

4. **Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 4, Translation Theory**

Translation Theory Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What is the first step in the process of interpreting a text, according to the lecture?

2. What is the difference between the source language and the receptor language in translation?

3. What is the main goal of a formal equivalent translation? Provide an example.

4. What is the main goal of a dynamic equivalent translation? Provide an example.

5. Why is a completely literal translation considered impossible?

6. Why is it said that every translation is an interpretation?

7. According to the lecture, what is an example of translation prioritizing spoken language?

8. What reading level does the NIV translation usually aim for?

9. What is the primary reason why new translations or updates to existing translations are necessary?

10. What is the main idea behind gender inclusive language in translation?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The first step in the process of interpreting a text is establishing the original text through textual criticism. Then, the next step in the process is the translation into the modern-day language of the reader.

2. The source language is the original language of the text (e.g., Hebrew and Greek), while the receptor language is the modern-day language the text is translated into (e.g., English).

3. A formal equivalent translation aims to reproduce as closely as possible the language, structure, and form of the original text, even if it sounds awkward in the receptor language. An example is the NASB.

4. A dynamic equivalent translation focuses on conveying the message of the source text in a way that will be understood by the modern reader, even if it requires sacrificing some of the original form or structure. An example is the TEV.

5. A completely literal translation is impossible because no two languages are identical, and there is no complete overlap between languages. Each language has its own unique structures, grammar, and nuances.

6. Every translation is an interpretation because translators must interpret the meaning of words, phrases, and grammatical structures in the source language and then choose the most appropriate words and constructions in the receptor language to convey that meaning.

7. An example of translations prioritizing the spoken language is the removal of the word "ass" when referring to a donkey in some translations to avoid offense to modern-day hearers.

8. The NIV translation usually aims for about a fifth or sixth grade reading level.

9. New translations or updates to existing translations are necessary because modern-day languages change, including word meanings, requiring updates to ensure accurate communication.

10. Gender-inclusive language in translation aims to make clear when the biblical text refers to both male and female, even when masculine words are used in the source language; this change to the text seeks clarity and accuracy for the modern reader.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Answer each of the following essay questions using your understanding of the provided text.

1. Discuss the spectrum of translation philosophies, from formal to dynamic equivalence, and explain how different priorities impact the final translation.

2. Explain why, according to the lecture, "every translation is an interpretation." Provide specific examples of how interpretive choices are made in the translation process.

3. Analyze the role that the intended audience plays in the translation process. How do translators tailor their work for different groups of readers, and what are some potential trade-offs?

4. Describe the main arguments for and against gender-inclusive language in biblical translation. Provide examples that show how translations change to be more inclusive.

5. Evaluate the role of translation in the process of hermeneutics and interpretation. How can awareness of translation philosophy influence one's understanding of the text?

Glossary

Formal Equivalence: A translation philosophy that aims to reproduce the original text's form, structure, and word order as closely as possible, even if it results in awkwardness in the receptor language.

Dynamic Equivalence: A translation philosophy that prioritizes conveying the meaning and message of the source text in a way that is clear and understandable to the modern-day reader, even if the original form needs to be altered.

Source Language: The original language of a text, such as Hebrew or Greek, from which the translation is made.

Receptor Language: The language into which a text is being translated, such as English, or a "modern-day language."

Textual Criticism: The process of examining and analyzing various manuscripts of a text to determine the most accurate original wording.

Paraphrase: A translation approach that goes further than dynamic equivalence, often rewriting the text in a more contemporary and less literal manner.

Gender-Inclusive Translation: A translation approach that seeks to make clear when the original text refers to both males and females, even when masculine language is used in the source language.

Hermeneutics: The theory and methodology of interpretation, especially of the biblical texts.

Inspiration: The belief that the original texts of the Bible were divinely inspired and therefore authoritative, distinct from the translation process.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 4, Translation Theory, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Biblical Translation Theories

- **What is the fundamental process of biblical translation, and what is considered the starting point?**

- The process begins with textual criticism, which aims to establish the most accurate original wording of the Hebrew and Greek texts from various manuscripts. Once this original text is established, the next step is translation, where the message is transferred from the source languages (Hebrew and Greek) into a receptor language (like English) for modern-day readers. The goal is to bridge the gap between the ancient texts and contemporary audiences.

- **What are the main differences between formal equivalent and dynamic equivalent translation philosophies?**

- Formal equivalent translations prioritize the source language (Hebrew and Greek), attempting to reproduce as closely as possible the original language's structure, grammar, and wording, sometimes at the expense of clarity in the receptor language (e.g., NASB, NRSV). In contrast, dynamic equivalent translations focus on the receptor language, aiming to communicate the meaning of the source text in a way that is easily understood by modern readers, even if it means sacrificing some of the original form and structure (e.g., TEV).

- **Why is a completely literal (or "wooden") translation considered impossible?**

- A completely literal translation is impossible because no two languages are identical. Languages have different structures, grammar, and nuances in meaning; words and their meanings rarely overlap perfectly, meaning that a one-to-one word correspondence is almost impossible. A "wooden" word-for-word translation of the source text often results in awkward, unintelligible, or even nonsensical language in the receptor language.

- **Why is it said that every translation is an interpretation?**

- Every translation is an interpretation because translators must make choices about meaning and representation. When choosing an English word to translate a Hebrew or Greek word, a translator must understand the meaning of both the original word and the potential English word, making it an interpretive process. Similarly, grammatical structures in one language may not have a direct parallel in another, requiring interpretation on how to best represent it.

- **How do translations prioritize the spoken language over the written?**

- Most translations are intended to be read aloud, often in congregations or other gatherings of people, where many are not scholars. Therefore, modern translations consider how text will sound when spoken. This can lead to the removal of words or phrasing that are accurate but may sound offensive or confusing to modern-day listeners, which would have been considered normal in previous iterations.

- **How do translations attempt to be understood by the intended audience?**

- Translations are often tailored for specific audiences based on their reading level and socio-economic background. This means a translation designed for the general public might use language appropriate for a fifth or sixth-grade reading level, while one for academics would be written at a higher level of sophistication. This underscores the goal of making the Bible accessible to a broader range of people.

- **What is the issue of gender in translations, and what are gender inclusive translations trying to accomplish?**

- Many languages, such as Greek and Hebrew, have gender built into their grammatical structure; they classify certain words as masculine or feminine. This becomes challenging when translating into English, which lacks grammatical gender. The issue is that Greek or Hebrew masculine words or pronouns are sometimes used to refer to both males and females, in instances referring to humanity as a whole. Gender-inclusive translations aim to make this clear by using language in the receptor language that includes both sexes, such as "people" instead of "man" or "they" instead of "he," where the context indicates the original text includes both male and female.

- **Why are new translations and updates to translations necessary?**

- New and updated translations are crucial due to the evolving nature of receptor languages. As language changes, some words may gain new meanings, while others may become archaic or offensive. Translations must be revised to communicate the meaning of the original text to contemporary readers in a language they understand. This includes the shifts in word meanings over time and the need to avoid misunderstandings that result from such changes.