

A Study of Principles of Bible Translation from the Perspective of Martin Luther's Bible Translation

PRINCIPE DE TRADUCTION DE LA BIBLE SELON LA BIBLE TRADUIT PAR MARTIN LUTHER

REN Xiaochuan¹

Abstract: This article deals with principles of Bible translation and highlights Martin Luther's Bible translation. Before Martin Luther's German Bible, Bible translations were characterized by theological translation. The translators treated the text with reverence and great caution for fear of distorting the meaning of the Bible. Their translations aimed at formal equivalence where the faithfulness to the text was the first priority. Beginning with Martin Luther's translation, the translators emphasized the readers' response and stressed the importance of translating into intelligible language. The translators also tended to adopt sense-for-sense translation so that the readers could fully understand the translation and get hold of the essence of the Bible.

Key words: Bible translation, Martin Luther, principles

Résumé: Cet article étudie la traduction de la Bible par Martin Luther comme le cas particulier, analyse le principe de traduction de la Bible. Les précédentes traductions de la Bible avant Martin Luther sont faites à visage théologique. Les traducteurs en face des mots sacrés, avec l'attitude prudente, pieuse et de respect, s'efforçaient d'être fidèle au texte de la Bible et cherchaient «l'égalité de la forme» de par crainte de s'écarter de ses intentions originales. À partir de Martin Luther, la traduction se concentre sur la réaction du lecteur. L'accent étant mis en lecture, la langue de la traduction est plus facile à comprendre par les lecteurs. La paraphrase est adoptée comme la technique de traduction, afin que les lecteurs comprennent complètement le texte traduit à saisir l'essence spirituelle de la Bible.

Mots-Clés: traduction de la Bible, Martin Luther, Principe

The Bible has become the book that has the largest number of translated versions and readers.

Bible translating includes a wider range of literary types (from lyric poetry to theological discourse) than any comparable kind of translating. Undoubtedly, one article cannot cover all the aspects. And this article focuses on the principles and characteristics of Bible translation.

¹ The Foreign Language Institute, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, Shandong, P.R. China.
E-mail: marieren72@gmail.com

* Received 20 December 2007; accepted 1 March 2008

1. PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

In China, people have discussed extensively their traditional three principles of an ideal translation, namely, faithfulness, smoothness, and elegance.(Nida, 2001:114) But the formulation of translation theories, however, involves primarily the Western world. Since the Bible has been translated for a longer period of time and into more languages(2,233 as of the beginning of the year2000) than any other book, it is not strange that some of the conflicts about principles of translation have focused on how one can legitimately translate a book which is regarded as divinely inspired. Peter Newmark(2001:45) also states that “The central problem of translating has always been whether to translate literally or freely. The argument has been going on since at least the first century BC.”

As the translator of the first German Bible, Martin Luther put forward the seven systematic detailed principles that should be followed by Bible translators :

Firstly, translator may change the word order of the original. Secondly, translator may use the auxiliary word of mood reasonably. Thirdly, translator may add some necessary conjunctions. Fourthly, translator may omit word in the original that was not equivalent word in the target language. Fifthly, translator may use phrase to translate a single word. Sixthly, translator may translate metaphorical usage into non-metaphorical usage and vice versa. Finally, translator should pay attention to variation from usage and accurate explanation of a word (Wen Jun, 2004:39).

According to Nida(2004:19), Alexander Fraser Tytler, who published a volume on “The principles of Translation”, set up the famous three principles as follows:

- 1st. The translation should give a complete transcript of the idea of the original work.
- 2nd. The style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original.
- 3rd. The translation should have all the ease of the original composition.

The 20th century has witnessed a radical change in translation principles. Writers, editors, publishers, and translators have all been caught up in a new mode of communication, subject to a vast variety of pressures and responding to numerous needs.(Nida,2004:21) A new concept, dynamic equivalence, formulated by Eugene Nida in the seventies, has been introduced in a systematic way for Bible translation. As for specific principles of translating the Bible, Nida (Baker,1998:27-28)put forward the following ones:

- 1st. The use of scholarly Greek and Hebrew texts;
- 2nd. Interpretations based on the best scholarly judgment;
- 3rd. Renderings that will be aurally intelligible and acceptable for the intended audience and the presumed uses of the text;
- 4th. The incorporation of background information into notes, introductions, and word list rather than leaving out such information or putting it into the text.

On April 21, 1999, at the meeting of the Forum of Bible Agencies, Translation section, a joint statement on basic principles for Bible translation was announced. All member organizations of the Forum of Bible Agencies affirm the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures and commit themselves to the following goals concerning translation principles:

- 1st. To translate the Scriptures accurately, without loss, change, distortion or embellishment of the

meaning of the original text. Accuracy in Bible translation is the faithful communication, as exactly as possible, of that meaning, determined according to sound principles of exegesis.

2nd. To communicate not only the informational content, but also the feelings and attitudes of the original text. The flavor and impact of the original should be re-expressed in forms that are consistent with normal usage in the receptor language.

3rd. To preserve the variety of the original. The literary forms employed in the original text, such as poetry, prophecy, narrative and exhortation, should be represented by corresponding forms with the same communicative functions in the receptor language. The impact, interest, and mnemonic value of the original should be retained to the greatest extent possible.

4th. To represent faithfully the original historical and cultural context. Historical facts and events should be expressed without distortion. At the same time the translation should be done in such a way that the receptor audience, despite differences of situation and culture, may understand the message that the original author was seeking to communicate to the original audience.

5th. To make every effort to ensure that no contemporary political, ideological, social, cultural, or theological agenda is allowed to distort the translation.

6th. To recognize that it is sometimes necessary to restructure the form of a text in order to achieve accuracy and maximal comprehension. Since grammatical categories and syntactic structures often do not correspond between different languages, it is often impossible or misleading to maintain the same form as the source text. Changes of form will also often be necessary when translating figurative language. A translation will employ as many or as few terms as are required to communicate the original meaning as accurately as possible.

7th. To use the most reliable original language Scripture texts as the basis for translation, recognizing that these are always the primary authority. However, reliable Bible translations in other languages may be used as intermediary source texts. (Net.1.)

It has been observed that principles which have been laid down to guide translation or are followed unconsciously in the course of the work, determine the process itself, as well as the final result. (Strandenaes,1987:146)

2. MARTIN LUTHER'S BIBLE TRANSLATION

2.1 The background of Martin Luther's Bible translation

By 500 AD the Bible had been translated into over 500 languages. Just one century later, by 600 AD, it has been restricted to only one language: the Latin Vulgate! The Catholic Church of Rome venerated it as the "one-and-only authentic Word of God"(Net.2) and refused to allow the scripture to be available in any language other than Latin. Jerome's Vulgate had risen above a mere translation and had been converted into the Bible itself. For centuries the Vulgate was the only source of authorized Roman Catholic translations and it "became the exegetical standard of the Roman Catholic Church, even supplanting the Greek text itself—not only officially, but emotionally. Cardinal Ximenes, for example, regarded the Latin Vulgate, which he printed in his Complutentian Polyglot between the Hebrew and the Septuagint, as being like the Lord between two thieves, with Hebrew the unrepentant thief."(Nida,2004:28)

In the 1490's, an Oxford professor, Thomas Linacre compared the Gospels in Greek to the Latin Vulgate and wrote in his diary, "Either this (the original Greek) is not the Gospel... or we are not Christians...The Latin had become so corrupt that it no longer even preserved the message of the Gospel... yet the Church still threatened to kill anyone who read the scripture in any language other than Latin."(Net.2). This denial by the authorities of the Western Church was one of the main reasons for the Protestant Reformation.

Although Jerome insisted that translations be made directly from the Hebrew. Actually, only part of

his Vulgate was translated from Hebrew (original text) and the majority of the Vulgate was based on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible done in Alexandria for Jews living outside the Holy Land. Hence, the mixing left a corrupted text that was a source of controversy well into the Reformation. (Peterson,2002:216).

In the Middle Ages, only scholars could read and understand Latin. But by the time Johannes Guttenberg invented the modern printing press (around 1456), the use of vernacular languages was becoming acceptable and widespread in official, educational, and religious settings. And as more people began to learn to read, there was a new demand for the Bible in vernacular languages. One of the most notable areas of translation work was the effort to translate the Bible into German under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther.

2.2 Advocating full intelligibility of the Bible translation

In the 16th century, the dominant figure in the field of translation was undoubtedly Martin Luther(1483-1546), a German theologian, Polemicist, social thinker, founder of the Reformation (Nida,2004:14).As the translator of the German Bible, he is widely regarded as the father of the German literary language, and his pronouncements on translation in the ‘Circular Letter’, especially the passage on “going out and asking the mother in her house, the children in the street, the ordinary man at the market”, are still taught in German schools.(Robinson,2006:83) His *German Bible* is the first one for the vulgar person. He deserves full credit for having sensed the importance of full intelligibility, especially in the heat of theological controversy. Martin Luther asserted that “no part of the Bible was obscure, except insofar as there was ignorance of the original Biblical languages” (Hammond, 1993:18). With reference to the mode of expression, he stated explicitly, “Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather, he must see to it—once he understands the Hebrew author—that he concentrates on the sense of the text, asking himself, Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation? Once he has the German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows.”(quoted, in 黄龙,1988:291).

2.3 The German Bible—the beginning of non-theological translation

On October 31,1517, Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg on which it is viewed as the birthday of the Reformation. After that, Luther found himself in constant conflict with the Roman hierarchy in his attempt to reform the church, until finally in 1521, he was excommunicated by Rome. Since his life was now in danger, Luther took refuge in the Wartburg castle, where he began his translation of New Testament and it was published in 1522. The Old Testament translation took another ten years. The German Bible was one of the great achievements of the Reformation. It was not only a source of religious instruction but also a prime force in uniting the German language and focusing nationalistic energies (Peterson, 2002:200). It was the first complete Bible in modern language to have been translated directly from the original languages, Greek and Hebrew.

Luther’s most important contribution to translation theory lies in what might be called his ‘reader-orientation’. In sharp contrast to Jerome’s principle of absolute literalness in the Vulgate, Luther advocates translating for a specific, intended audience. He personalizes language, humanizes it, and blends it with the vitality of his own sense of self. In so doing, significantly enough, he socializes it: what he internalizes is no solipsistic fantasy-system but language as social communication, language as what people like him (members of his class) say to each other in real-life speech situations (Robinson, 2006:84). Luther claimed to have made his translation more colloquial and more understandable. His linguistic standard was not ecclesiastical language, heavily influenced by Latin, but the language that “the mother in her house and the common man would (speak)” (Robinson 1996: 96). In translating the Bible, he helped to form the unified, standard and general written language by assembling German vocabulary, removing the interference of dialects, which provided the most important premise of modern

German. “As Dante made the dialect of Tuscany become the language of Italy, as Chaucer helped to make our Midland dialect into modern English, so Luther caused central German to become the normal type for the whole country”(Broomhall, 1934:78).

In face of the attack of the “enemies of the truth”(quoted, in Robinson, 2006:84), Luther had to defend his views of translating in a document, which had a major influence on freeing the vernacular languages of Europe from the heavy hand of ecclesiastical Latin. (Nida, 2001:241).

It is one of the great ironies of the history of Western translation theory that orthodox translation theory should be repeatedly defended in wild, shaggy, ‘rebellious’ letters like this one (Circular Letter on Translation) – that, for example, Luther should feel just as compelled to take vicious potshots at the Catholic defenders of Jerome’s Vulgate translation as Jerome had felt to snipe at his detractors 1135 years before; and that the central issue, whether to translate word for word or sense for sense, should be exactly the same, unchanged by a millennium of medieval theology in the two documents (Robinson,2006:84).

History repeats itself! The same thing happened to Luther 1135 years later and the focus is still the age-old question: Should we translate “word for word” or “sense for sense”? The conflict between literal translation and paraphrase translation is really an endless war. Summarizing the importance of Luther’s achievement, James Korthals writes:

Before 1518, Luther’s was the first German translation made from the Greek, using the second edition of Erasmus’ Greek New Testament... His effort did a great deal to standardize the German language. His Bible was one of High German’s most significant and most widely distributed documents. It made Luther the most influential author in the German tongue. (Korthals, 2001:179)

3. SUMMARY

In this article, we elaborate the principles of Bible translation and analyze Martin Luther’s Bible translation as a case study. Luther is free from the confine of utmost fidelity to the text and strived to be faithfulness to the readers. His first priority is the intelligibility of the version so that common readers can also understand the meaning and get hold of the essence of the Bible, that is, his finding of “justification by faith”. His German Bible serves as a watershed in Bible translation.

REFERENCES

- Baker, Mona. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* [Z]. London and New York :Routledge, 1998:27-277
- Broomhall, Marshall. *The Bible in China* [M]. London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1934:x,78-83
- Campbell, George. *The Four Gospels.Vol.1* [Z]. London: Strahan&Cadell ,1789:445-446
- Hammond, Gerald. The Authority of the Translated Word of God: A Reading of the Preface to the 1611 Bible[J]. *Translation and Literature*, 1993:18
- Korthals, James. Key Events in Church History: Part III[J]. *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 2001(98): 171-195.
- Newmark P. *A Textbook of Translation* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001:45

- Nida, Eugene A. *Language and Culture---Contexts in Translating*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press,2001:114-275
- Nida, Eugene A. *Toward a Science of Translating* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press,2004: 4 -166
- Peterson.R.Dean .*The Concise History of Christianity*[M]. Beijing: Peking University Press,2002:216-253
- Robinson, Douglas. *Translation and Taboo*[M]. Dekalb IL.: Northern Illinois University Press,1996:4-96
- Robinson,D.. *Western Translation Theory: from Herodotus to Nietzsche*[M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2006:23-84
- WEN Jun. On Martin Luther's Translation Principles[J]. *US-China Foreign Language*, 2004 (2):35-41
- Strandenaes, Thor. Principles of Chinese Bible Translation as Expressed in Five Selected Versions of the New Testament and Exemplified by Mt.5:1-12 and Col.1 [D]. Stockholm: Graphic Systems A B, 1987:1- 146
- 黃龍. 翻譯學[M]. 江蘇: 江蘇教育出版社, 1988:268-291
- Net.1 Basic Principles and Procedures for Bible Translation
<http://www.bible-researcher.com/translation-methods.html>
- Net.2 English Bible History
http://www.worldbiblesociety.org/history_of_bible.html