

What Makes A Good Translation?

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Introduction: God graciously revealed himself to humanity through written, inerrant, authoritative communication. His word came to us in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. He has providentially preserved it from generation to generation. With the passing of successive centuries, an increasing number of people groups have experienced the blessing of reading his word in their own language. Translations are the word of God in a derivative sense. In other words, they derive their authority from the fact that they reflect the meaning of God's word as originally given. Consequently, the goal of biblical translation is to transfer the meaning of God's Word contained in the source languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into an understandable form in the receptor language. The better a translation approximates the meaning of the source language, the better our understanding of God's word.

In this workshop we will examine cultural influences that affect the current debate about translations, survey translation issues that contribute to the complexity of the task, introduce the various theories that dominate the field of Bible translation, and conclude with practical suggestions on the selection and use of English Bibles.

I. Cultural issues that affect discussion of modern translations

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, deep divisions have appeared within the ranks of conservative Christians regarding the issue of Bible versions. From this writer's perspective, several cultural issues contribute to the rift. Three bear significant weight for consideration of our current subject.

A. American Christians generally lack an understanding of church history.

Careful study of church history fails to spark interest in the average Christian. The mere mention of "history" conjures up memories of being forced to memorize names, places, and dates for examinations in high school history class—and every high school student has asked, "Why do I have to study this?" Many churches, therefore, fail to educate their members in this important field of study, fearing the displeasure people who bore easily. Instead, church leaders opt to feed their congregations a steady diet of "relevant" studies. The end result is generations of believers who know little or nothing about how we got our Bible. For example, how many realize that the pilgrims brought the Geneva Bible with them on the Mayflower, not the King James Version? Still fewer would guess that R. V. Clearwaters, unquestionably a fundamentalist leader, used to reflect the

consensus of fundamentalists in his generation by saying, “A good translation will be the closest natural equivalent first in meaning and second in style.”¹

B. American Christians tend to value experience over theology.

Generations of Christians have come to embrace experience as the validating aspect of their belief system. Conversely, emphasis on detailed, systematic theology breeds suspicion. This situation has arisen partly in response to forces at work in our cultural context and partly because of various strains of theological thought that have ebbed and flowed through American churches. The devaluation of theology and the elevation of emotion affect the discussion of translations because Americans tend to have deep emotional attachments to their version of choice—attachments nearly impervious to theological argumentation.

C. American Christians spend their lives in a monolingual context.

The geo-political history of our nation essentially dispensed with the need for most Americans to master multiple languages. Few have ever had exposure to a second language except for, perhaps, a torturous experience with rudimentary French or Spanish in the ninth grade. Gone are the days when *basic* education necessarily included the study of Latin in order to equip students with a good understanding of the building blocks of language. Even those who study Greek and Hebrew at the post-graduate level in seminary have little conception of the intricacies of the work of translation because they have never struggled to translate their native language into meaningful, full-orbed communication in another language. Consequently, most discussions about translation are riddled with misunderstanding and naiveté.

II. Common misconceptions about translation

Naiveté concerning translation proliferates numerous misconceptions. This discussion focuses on three of the most common.

A. “One size fits all”

“Which Bible is best?” Christians often ask this question and, on the surface, it seems simple enough. However, it begs for us to ask another question, namely,

¹ Quoted by W. Edward Glenny, “English Translations” in *The Bible Version Debate: The Perspective of Central Baptist Theological Seminary* (Minneapolis: Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), p. 118. His words either coincidentally or intentionally echo the perspective of Eugene Nida, translation pioneer and most influential advocate of a translation theory known as dynamic (or functional) equivalence. See Sakae Kubo and Walter F. Specht, *So Many Versions?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 342. In support of the implied assertion that older fundamentalists were not typically King James Only, see Douglas Kutilek, “The Background and Origin of the Version Debate,” in *One Bible Only?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), pp. 27-56.

“Best for what purpose?” Does one intend to use a certain translation for detailed study and analysis of the text of Scripture? If so, a translation that approximates the structure of the underlying Greek or Hebrew is best, even though ready understanding of the text inevitably disappears with such an approach. But suppose one intends to use a translation to encourage Bible reading among children or Christians who use English as a second language. In that case, a version that provides a readable, easily understood translation works best. Most people will choose a single translation to function as their primary text for reading, studying, evangelism, worship, scripture memory, etc. No one translation can perfectly address all of these specialized uses. Therefore, one must carefully consider the translation theory used in their translation of choice because translation theory gives a version strengths and weaknesses in various applications.

B. “Accuracy” is a clear objective

“Which Bible is most accurate?” fares little better than “which Bible is best?” This question forces consideration of the standard(s) by which we can determine accuracy. Will we deem a version accurate if it follows the word order of the underlying Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic? Consider what happens to John 3:16, perhaps the best known verse in the Bible, if we use this standard:☒

*Thusly for loved the God the world so that the son the only born he gave that all the one trusting into him might not be destroyed but might have life eternal.*² ☒

Obviously, if a translator strictly follows word order, his work, while “accurate” on one level, results in an unintelligible translation.

Or is a version accurate if it consistently translates the one word in the original by the same word in English? Consider as an example, the flexible way that we use the English word “love.” In various contexts, the word can refer to an emotional attachment, a deep commitment, a superficial preference, a sexual union, or benevolent activity. The original languages of Scripture have many words equally fluid.

Does a translation achieve accuracy if the meaning of the source language is described in the receptor language? If so, how far can one deviate from the specific terms used in, say, the Greek in order to facilitate understanding in English? For example, does the translator have the liberty to convert units of currency, such as the “denarius,” into equivalent dollar amounts and still call it a translation?

²Nestle, Erwin, and Paul R. McReynolds. *Nestle Aland 26th Edition Greek New Testament With McReynolds English Interlinear*. Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, c1982.

At the very least, one must understand that the quest for accuracy in translation involves complex decisions at every turn. Superficial insistence on a “word-for-word” or “literal” translation reflects linguistic naiveté and only serves to obfuscate the real issues.

C. Translation does not involve interpretation

Many modern translations suffer harm from the accusation that they “interpret the text rather than translate it.” For example, Leland Ryken³ states that,

“a good translation preserves the full interpretive potential of the original text of the Bible. It does not short-circuit the interpretive process. It does not make preemptive interpretive strikes and then hide them from the view of the reader.”⁴

This reflects his opinion that a translation should “preserve the full exegetical potential of the original text.”⁵ While presenting a stirring logical argument, his perspective is misleading. In reality, as Ryken well knows, no such translation exists, nor can one exist. Every act of translation requires interpretation. Every English version on the market has relied heavily on the interpretive work of the translators. This holds true even for the KJV translators who said, “Another thing we wish to advise you about, gentle reader, is that we have not tied ourselves to any uniformity of phrasing or to any identity of words.”⁶ *Limits* of interpretive license would provide more fruitful discussion.

III. Significant issues in translation

This section provides a brief sampling of the kinds of issues that affect the translation process. It is not intended to supply an in-depth look, but rather information sufficient to illustrate the complexity of translation and thus dispel common, simplistic pronouncements often made about modern versions.

A. Issues of Text

Translation begins with a text in the source language. In biblical translation, the translators must first determine the content of that text. This is an issue because

³ Dr. Ryken is an able scholar who teaches English at Wheaton College. He served as literary stylist for the English Standard Version. He recently published an influential book entitled, *The Word of God in English* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), which makes authoritative pronouncements concerning translation theory, a discipline that actually lies outside his field of expertise. The influence of such a work is unfortunate because it has an “air” of expertise, but actually misleads the uninformed by perpetuating linguistic naiveté.

⁴ Ryken, *The Word of God In English*, p. 289.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “The Translators to the Reader: Preface to the King James Version” in *One Bible Only?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), p. 213.

the words of Scripture were passed from generation to generation in hand-written format until the advent of the printing press in 1450. Consequently, copyists created variations in the manuscripts, mostly unintentional, though some apparently introduced variations intentionally. Textual criticism is the process of sifting through the extant (existing and known) manuscripts and comparing them in order to determine the original reading. The work of New Testament textual criticism has produced, broadly speaking, three schools of thought regarding the original text:

1. The original text is preserved in the Textus Receptus (TR).

The expression “Textus Receptus” means “Received Text.” It comes from an advertising blurb that accompanied the publication of a Greek text of the New Testament compiled by Roman Catholic scholar, Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536). The printers agreed to publish Erasmus’ Latin revision of Jerome’s Vulgate if he would make it a comparative volume containing both Latin and Greek. Erasmus hastily compiled a Greek text from seven (or possibly eight) partial manuscripts. The third edition of Erasmus’ Greek text became the dominant, though not exclusive, text underlying the New Testament translation of the King James Version.

Today, one can find two schools of thought, each with a preference for Erasmus’ text. First, some believe that God *providentially* preserved the TR. Therefore, they prefer it as a superior text. A second group believes that God *miraculously* preserved the New Testament text in the TR. Consequently, insist that the TR is the *only* text of the NT (often insisting, as well, that the KJV is the only allowable translation of the text). In either case, those who embrace the TR do so in spite of manuscript evidence, rather than because of it. For them, Erasmus functioned as the last acceptable textual critic.

The TR, to some degree, underlies both the King James Version and the New King James Version.

2. The original text is preserved in the Majority Text.

Another school of thought says that the original text of Scripture exists within the considerable body of extant manuscripts. One can determine the original words of Scripture by counting the manuscripts that support a particular reading. The authentic reading is the one that has the most witnesses. Hence, the original reading resides in the “Majority Text.”

This view has garnered little support primarily because it lacks any satisfying way to deal with the problem of errors preserved and propagated through generations of copies.

No Bible version uses the Majority Text.

3. The original text is preserved in an Eclectic Text.

The dominant view of biblical scholarship is that the vast body of ancient manuscripts and versions should be *weighed* to determine the best reading on a case-by-case basis. In other words, does an evaluation of the various readings for a given verse bring us to the conclusion that at some point a scribe misspelled a word, or accidentally omitted a phrase, or misunderstood a word, etc? This process of evaluating the manuscripts produces an “eclectic text.”

With the exception of the NKJV, every Bible version published since the KJV has used the eclectic text as the basis for the New Testament, a fact visualized in the following chart:

Textus Receptus	Majority Text	Eclectic Text
KJV	-	ASV
NKJV		RSV
		NRSV
		NASB
		TEV
		GNB
		CEV
		NCV
		NLT
		NET
		NIV

B. Issues of vocabulary

This writer has already suggested the impossibility of a word-for-word translation. Consider this illustration: The New Testament contains a vocabulary of about 5,500 Greek words. Suppose there was a need to translate the NT into the language of biblical Hebrew, which has a vocabulary of about 4,000 words. Clearly, any attempt at word-for-word translation would have to be abandoned. Instead, the translator would seek ways to *explain concepts* in the words of the receptor language.

Even though English has a rich vocabulary, the translator cannot work very far in the biblical text until he encounters a word in Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic that has no exact equivalent in English. What shall he do? He must *explain the concepts* in the words of the receptor language.

Another related problem flows from the fact that words have a range of meaning. We determine a specific meaning of any given word from its context because words in any language have multiple potential meanings. The range of meaning a word has in the source language will usually not replicate the exact range of meaning associated with any single word in the receptor language, requiring the translator to search for appropriate equivalents. Can anyone seriously imagine finding a single word in another language that exactly parallels all the uses of the word “board” in this sentence?:

The *board* decided to *board* up the old ship with a piece of *board*, while the passengers climbed on *board*.⁷

Similarly, biblical translators have to look for ways to communicate the specific meaning a word has in each of the varied contexts in which it appears in the source language. For example, one may generally translate the Greek word *sarx* with the English equivalent, “flesh,” but in various contexts it can mean: “1) the physical material that covers a body’s bones, 2) the human body in its entirety, 3) human beings generally, 4) the human condition (as legitimately distinct from God), and 5) the state of human fallenness (in illegitimate opposition to God).”⁸ A uniform translation might preserve the consistency of usage in the source language, but can actually produce inaccuracy in the receptor language.

The quest to find the right words or phrases in the receptor language to communicate the meaning expressed in the vocabulary of the source language is an obvious and necessary part of translation. This concern provides justification for periodically updating translations as the receptor language evolves. Those who were immersed in the language of the KJV from childhood have little difficulty following its structure, idioms, grammar and vocabulary. They also have little conception of just how foreign its archaic language can sound to readers with little or no biblical background (a growing segment of American society). Consider the difficulty of these words scattered throughout the KJV:

Chambering, champaign, charger (not a horse), churl, cieled, circumspect, clouted upon their feet, cockatrice, collops, confection (nothing to do with sugar), cotes, covert, hoised, wimples, stomacher, wot, wist, withs, suretiship, sackbut, the scall, scrabbled, roller (a splint), muffler, firkin, froward, brigadine, amerce, blains, croockbackt, descry, fanners, felloes, glede, glistening, neesing, niter, tabret, wen.⁹

⁷ This illustration is borrowed from D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 74.

⁸ Glen G. Scorgie, “Introduction and Overview,” in *The Challenges of Bible Translation*, p. 33.

⁹ Adapted from a list compiled by Edwin Palmer, cited by James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995), pp. 236-37.

English readers in the 17th century would readily understand these terms. Why should we not frame the word of God in language that readers in the 21st century understand with equal ease?

C. Issues of grammar and syntax

Grammar and syntax vary widely from language to language. For example, neither Greek nor Hebrew reflect time in verb tenses the way English does. In other words, our current understanding of the function of Greek verb tenses is that they are not tenses at all! They do not directly and unambiguously communicate the concepts of past, present, or future action. S. Porter explains that:

“when Greek speakers used a verb they had something other than temporal categories in mind with regard to what the verb form itself meant. . . . users could speak of when processes occurred, but they did not use verb forms alone to do so. They instead used various other tools in their language.”¹⁰

This means that the translator must make a judgment as to what time element to assign any given Greek verb when translated into English. Often, markers in the context make the choice easy. At other times, the choice is difficult.

This highlights but one of a myriad of judgments a translator must make because of the grammatical and syntactical differences between Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, on the one hand, and English on the other. Add to this the following examples:

- All Greek nouns, adjectives, pronouns and definite articles have gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter), but English has little gender related inflection.
- English does not allow the use of a double negative. In Greek, a double negative is good grammar, used as a point of emphasis.
- Etc.

D. Issues of structure

One of the striking features of NT Greek is its liberal use of participles (verbal forms often translated in English as –ing verbs). NT authors frequently strung together participles along with other grammatical elements to construct long complex sentences—a structural feature that translates poorly into English. Consider Ephesians 2:1 as an example:

¹⁰ Cited by Rodney Decker in “Verbal Aspect in Recent Debate: Objections to Porter’s Non-Temporal View of the Verb,” a paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Eastern Regional Annual Meeting, 3/30/01, Philadelphia Biblical University, Langhorne, PA.

KJV	NASB	NIV
And you <i>hath he quickened</i> , who were dead in trespasses and sins;	And you were dead in your trespasses and sins	As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,

A superficial comparison of these three translations yields the conclusion that NASB and the NIV omitted an element of the text. On closer examination, however, the reader will note that the expression *hath he quickened* (an archaic expression meaning, “he made alive”) appears in italics in the KJV. This means that the words do not appear in the Greek text underlying verse one. Why did the translators of the KJV insert them? It is because the Greek text forms one long, complicated sentence that *extends all the way through verse seven*. In order to create this complex sentence, Paul strung together participles in ways that would be nearly incomprehensible if “literally” translated into English. Consequently, every translation must modify the structure of this sentence. The KJV translators introduce the point that God has “quickened us” in the first verse in order to make sense of the sentence, but in the Greek, Paul does not make this point until verse five. Other translators opted to break up the sentence into smaller units. Each of these represents a valid approach to translation, but can hardly be called “literal.”

Difficulties created by sentence structure multiply significantly when translating Hebrew poetry. Using English poetry to illustrate the point, consider how a poet communicates subtle nuances of meaning through the skillful use of meter, rhythm, rhyme, etc. Hebrew poetry follows structural patterns that differ from typical English poetry (a fact that alone creates translational difficulties), but it also makes extensive use of structure to nuance the meaning of the text. The translator has to seek ways to communicate as many of these nuances as possible because they contribute to the meaning of the source text.

E. Issues of cultural idiom

Figures of speech present a thorny problem for the translator. Idiomatic expressions that are clear and meaningful in one language seldom transfer to another language. What would inhabitants of Thailand think about the fact that someone has a “frog in his throat,” or “stared daggers,” or “bawled out” his boss?” Add to this the problem that some straightforward, non-idiomatic expressions in one language translate into idioms in other cultures.

What should the Bible translator do with these examples?¹¹

- “White as snow” in Irian Jyra = “make dirty” (black people sitting around a fire and get white ash on them = dirty!)“Stand at the door and knock” in

¹¹Rodney Decker, “Translation Issues,” http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/rd_rsrc.htm#Semantics.

some cultures implies a thief! (Only a thief knocks to see if anyone is home before robbing the house; a friend will shout, not knock.)

- “Son of man” in Kouykon Indian dialect of Alaska and Canada = “son of any man” = “bastard, illegitimate son”—not an appropriate translation as a title for Jesus Christ!

The Bible contains numerous cultural idioms which, when translated into English, lack clarity at best, or create misunderstanding at worst. Consider Proverbs 6:24 (KJV).

²⁴ To keep thee from the evil woman, from the flattery of the tongue of a strange woman.

The Hebrew word underlying the expression “strange woman” is a feminine adjective that literally means “alien,” or “foreign,” hence a “foreign woman.” The KJV retains an element of the Hebrew with the translation “strange,” as in stranger. But what does the expression convey to modern English readers with no biblical background? An odd woman? Even an elementary understanding of the parallelism of Hebrew poetry does not resolve the matter because it remains unclear in what sense one should consider a strange woman “evil.” The impact of the crassly literal translation, “foreign woman,” would be far worse, seemingly justifying some form of xenophobia or racial prejudice. However, when one understands that “foreign woman” commonly designated a prostitute (see Proverbs 23:27) and that in this particular context, the woman in view was married, a more accurate translation is the less literal “adulteress,” preferred by the NIV and NASB.

Or consider the idiom “cleanness of teeth” as it appears in Amos 4:6 (KJV):

⁶ And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD.

Unfortunately, in our culture, the expression “clean teeth” connotes a nice smile—certainly *not* Amos’ intended meaning! Amos used the idiom to state that “since the nation refused to repent, God sent a famine on the land, and there was little or no food to get caught between the teeth.”¹² The NIV boldly, and correctly, translates the meaning of the expression, “I gave you empty stomachs,” and flags the reader to the change in a footnote.

F. Issues of style

¹² Herbert M. Wolf, “Literal vs. Accurate,” in *The Making of the NIV*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 132.

The question of writing style presents the translator with another complex set of issues. The original language texts of Scripture contain a variety of writing styles. For example, John wrote in the simple, straightforward style one would expect from a Galilean fisherman, while Paul's writing style features the complexities one would expect from a man with a high degree of formal training. The author of the book of Hebrews wrote in yet another style, at times introducing features of a more sophisticated literary technique. Each of these varied writing styles contribute to the full-orbed message communicated through Holy Scripture. Accordingly, the translator must try to reflect the writing style in the receptor language—no small task!

Frankly, this fact negates *some* of the arguments for or against various English texts based on “beauty” or “dignity” of style. The receptor language should be neither more formal nor informal than the source language. For example, one of the complaints often lodged against some modern English versions focuses on their failure to retain the “more respectful” use of Thee and Thou when referring to deity.¹³ However, the original languages did not make a distinction between common pronouns (you) and reverential pronouns (Thee).¹⁴ Therefore, the use of “you” when referring to God follows better, more accurate style.

Another stylistic issue has to do with the penchant NT Greek authors had for using verbs in the passive voice. Frequent use of passives is unacceptable English style. Though the Greek passives can translate into English, such a translation seems unnatural and has little stylistic appeal.

G. Issues of theology

Several modern versions are the product of translators who did not share a commitment to the Scriptures as the inerrant word of God. Often their theological bias shows through in the interpretive choices made. Consider these examples:

Genesis 11:1 (The New English Bible)

Once upon a time all the world spoke a single language. . .

Isaiah 14:7 (Revised Standard Version)

Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son. . .

Acts 13:48 (Living Bible)

As many as wanted eternal life, believed.

While these illustrations clearly demonstrate that theological prejudice can influence Bible translation, one must avoid the conclusion that such influence

¹³ Replacement of these archaic pronouns was the major change in the 1995 update of NASB.

¹⁴ One should also note that when the KJV was published, “thee” and “thou” were ordinary pronouns. The sense of reverence only attached to them as our language evolved.

completely negates the value of a particular translation. Robert Thomas correctly observes:

The nature of the translation discipline is sufficiently objective to reduce the overall impact of such bias to a minimum. In other words, though the fruit of prejudice may be evident in translation, it rarely affects one's broad conclusions about doctrine when he studies doctrinal matters in that translation. He may be misled regarding a detail here and there, but in almost every case he can formulate teachings that are generally sound.¹⁵

Bibles produced by committees composed of translators committed to the inerrancy of Scripture should be used as the primary texts for personal reading, study, or public worship. Comparison with other versions for study purposes may contribute to our sense of the original text. The work of comparison itself will reveal any theological bias here or there in a particular version.

H. Issues of format

One feature of translation that seldom receives much attention is the format used to present Scripture in the target language. Historically, several versions have opted to follow the lead of the KJV, treating each verse as a separate paragraph. Special features mark the paragraph divisions, but their effectiveness is questionable.¹⁶ A preferable approach is to use normal English style, dividing the text into paragraph formats. If translation is designed to communicate the fullest meaning of the source language possible, the transfer of meaning should not be inhibited by the use of a distracting or confusing format.

Format plays an important role in the translation of Hebrew poetry. The interpretation of Hebrew poetry depends in large degree on the reader's ability to identify the features of poetic parallelism. The use of running text obscures these important features (cf. KJV). A format that shows the poetic structure (e.g., NIV) is far preferable.

Other format issues involve punctuation and capitalization, each of which can significantly impact the interpretation of certain texts.

IV. Current approaches to translation

¹⁵ Robert L. Thomas, *An Introductory Guide for Choosing English Bible Translations* (no publisher, 1988), p. 60.

¹⁶ For example, NASB uses verse numbers in bold type to identify new paragraphs, a feature unparalleled in English texts other than the Bible and, therefore, easily overlooked.

Broadly speaking, two distinct schools of thought dominate discussions of translation theory. All Bible versions utilize these two theories, but fall at different positions on a continuum between two extremes. In other words, all versions represent a mixture of translation techniques, differing only in the degree to which one of these two theories dominated the process. This section introduces each theory and then suggests a mediating position.

A. Formal equivalence theory

In this approach to translation, form (style) tends to take priority over meaning. The translators place greater weight on consistent use of vocabulary and faithful preservation of the structure and form found in the source language. They also endeavor to retain ambiguities found in the source language, avoiding interpretative judgments insofar as possible. This approach often results in poor English and increases the difficulty of understanding.

The NASB stands as the most extreme example of formal equivalence translation among modern versions. While very accurate at one level, thus achieving the status of preferred text for many serious students of the English Bible, its wooden (artificial) style has prevented it from achieving the popularity of other modern versions. In the words of one evangelical scholar and translator:

“My chief complaint with the NASB, for example, is that it tries so hard to reflect the underlying Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic that it often resorts to awkward English or unnecessarily stylized English.¹⁷”

B. Functional equivalence theory¹⁸

Functional equivalence lies at the other end of the spectrum of translation theory. It focuses greater attention on the receptor language. With this approach, meaning takes priority over form. The translators try to replicate the reaction of the original readers on a thought-by-thought basis. This approach results in a very readable and stylistically pleasing English version, but too often the opinions of the translators dominate the text.

Every modern English version produced in the last 50 years falls into this category except for NASB, NIV, and ESV.

Paraphrased Bibles take the concerns of functional equivalence to the farthest extreme, the priority of meaning outweighing *any* concern regarding form. However, a paraphrase does not technically qualify as a translation.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 89.

¹⁸ Eugene Nida popularized the expression, “dynamic equivalence” to describe this approach to translation. He later coined the expression “functional equivalence,” giving it a slightly different meaning than “dynamic equivalence.” However, in most discussions, these two expressions have come to be used as virtual synonyms.

C. An eclectic (balanced) approach

Most discussions of translation focus on the merits of one theory over the other. However, since all translators must employ both formal and functional equivalence to varying degrees, and since an overemphasis on one theory to the exclusion of the other results in either obscured or distorted meaning, this writer suggests that a consciously balanced approach provides a better alternative. An eclectic approach means that the translator carefully weighs issues of form *and* meaning on a verse-by-verse basis.

The NIV serves as an example of the eclectic approach. Kenneth Barker suggests that the NIV defies classification as either a formal or functional equivalence translation: “After considerable personal study, comparison, and analysis, I have become convinced that . . . scholars must recognize the validity of a third major category of translation, namely, the balanced or mediating type.”¹⁹ Calvin D. Linton (Dean Emeritus of the College of Arts and Sciences, George Washington University) expresses the same viewpoint when he says that the NIV’s “method is an eclectic one with emphasis for the most part on a flexible use of concordance and equivalence.”²⁰ Robert W. Milliman (professor of New Testament at Central Baptist Theological Seminary) concurs.²¹

In some conservative circles, the NIV has suffered harm from the fact that reviewers often classify it as a functional equivalent translation, thus associating it with less conservative versions, such as the GNB or the NEB.²² As noted above, it does not technically fit this category. Part of the confusion has arisen from the fact that the NIV is a truly “new” modern translation, i.e., it was the first modern version that did not revise a previous version. At the same time, it departed from the undue preoccupation that translators have had with the source language, applying a measured amount of functional equivalence. Consequently, the reaction against this new version was often strong, though indefensible.

To be sure, a few verses in the NIV reflect questionable judgment on the part of the translators, an accusation that applies to *every* English translation. This writer

¹⁹ Kenneth L. Barker, “Bible Translation Philosophies” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, p. 53.

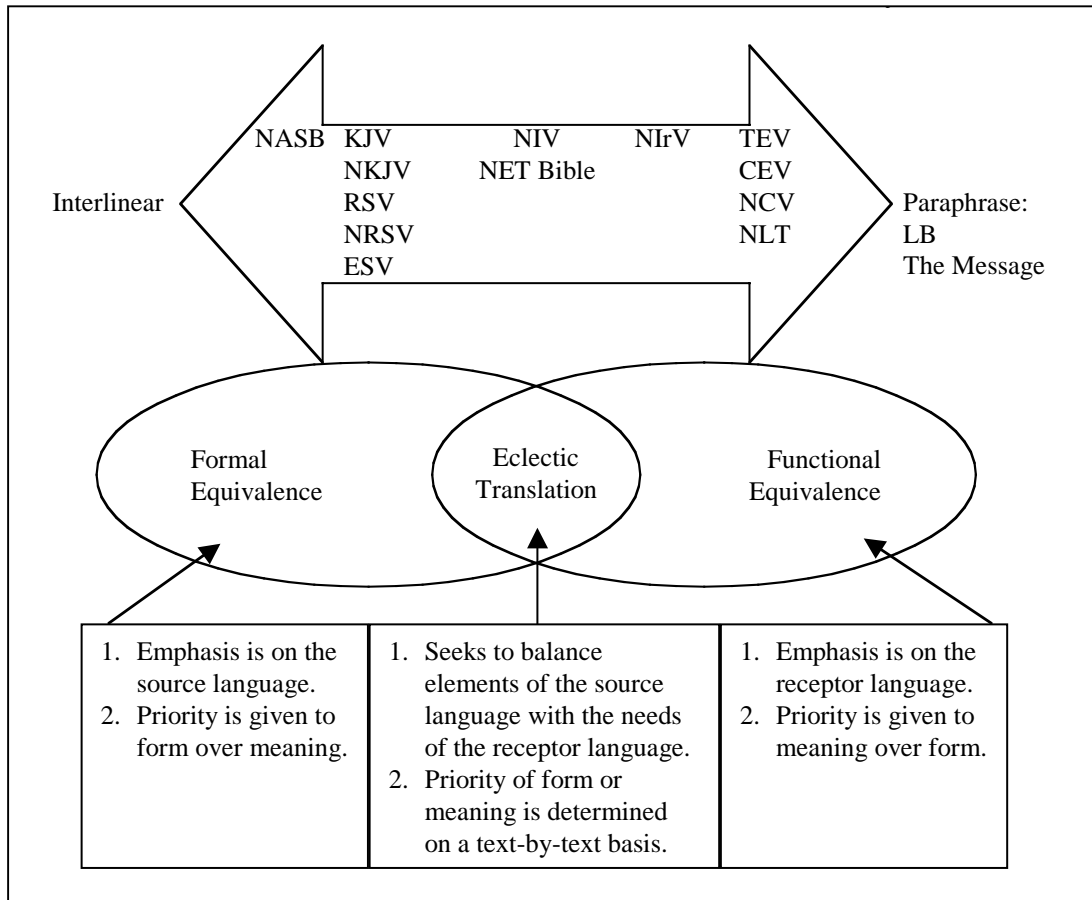
²⁰ “The Importance of Literary Style in Bible Translation Today,” in *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation*, p. 20. He uses older terminology when he refers to formal equivalence as “concordance,” and simply “equivalence” to signify what is now commonly called by the fuller expression “functional equivalence.”

²¹ “Translation Theory and Twentieth-Century Versions” in *One Bible Only?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), p. 145.

²² Leland Ryken promotes the ESV over the NIV by using guilt by association. In *The Word of God In English*, he frequently lists the NIV alongside versions that have obvious problems and criticizes them all as functional equivalent translations. However, when he uses specific illustrations of questionable translations, he frequently builds his case with quotes from the latter while ignoring the former. Interestingly, his preferred version, the ESV, makes liberal use of functional equivalence as well and at times even takes greater liberties with the text by widely using gender inclusive language.

agrees with the observation of Herbert M. Wolf who wrote, “While it may be true that at times the NIV translators have been guilty of reading something into the text, I would contend that overall this version has achieved a high level of accuracy by its philosophy of translation. By occasionally moving away from a literal translation, they have produced a more accurate translation that captures the meaning of the original languages with greater precision.”²³

The relationship of the translation theories outlined above and their role in the production of the major English versions can be visualized:



V. Summary and conclusion

In view of the discussion above, the following observations warrant attention:

- A. Selection of an English version involves consideration of the purpose the Bible will serve.

²³ “Literal vs. Accurate,” in *The Making of the NIV*, p. 127.

Some might wish to use a readable version with transparent meaning for public and private reading, evangelism, and some teaching venues. The NIV provides a good choice for these varied applications. At the same time, one might desire to use a more formal version in rigorous study. The NASB provides an excellent choice for this application.

- B. Selection of an English version involves consideration of the dominant translation theory employed by the translators.

Versions that primarily emphasize functional equivalence tend to suffer from an undue amount of interpretation in the text. These versions may prove useful when comparing numerous versions to get a “feel” for a possible range of meaning in a given verse, but they are unsuitable for general usage.

Versions that primarily emphasize formal equivalence tend to suffer from a stilted or wooden style. NASB is an excellent choice in this category, but it is difficult to understand in numerous places. It has strong appeal among people who possess a significant background in biblical studies, but those with little or no exposure to the Bible will find it tedious.

The other alternative is the eclectic approach that balances these two theories, weighing their respective value on a verse-by-verse basis. The NIV falls into this category.

- C. Selection of an English version involves consideration of the readability of the text.

This issue involves a combination of translation theory and the age of the version. Christians develop strong emotional attachments to their Bible of choice, but comfort should not take precedence over clear, unimpeded understanding of the Bible’s message. Consequently, the Bible in modern English is preferable to versions that retain archaic language such as the KJV and ASV.

Note: This does not mean that use of the KJV *must* be abandoned. Such transitions take time and involve many factors. However, one must face the fact that use of the KJV in public ministry requires significant additional effort to make the text clear to modern readers. It will also ensure that most new converts who lack exposure to the Bible will become “self-feeders” slowly, if at all.

- D. Selection of an English version involves consideration of the accuracy of the underlying texts.

The KJV and NKJV are the only two English versions based on the Textus Receptus (TR), Erasmus' text of the Greek NT. No other versions follow this tradition because the superiority of the TR is indefensible. Those who prefer it do so in spite of textual evidence, not because of it.

- E. Selection of an English version involves consideration of the commitment of the translators to the authority of the Scriptures.

A translation committee must approach its task from the foundational belief that the Bible is God's inerrant, authoritative communication to humanity, preserved in propositional form. Compromise on this point will manifest itself in the translation of key passages of Scripture. Modern English versions translated by those who hold a commitment to the doctrine of inerrancy include NASB, NIV, and NKJV.²⁴ Older versions that fit this category are the KJV and ASV.

Recommended Reading:

Beacham, Roy E. and Kevin T. Bauder, eds. *One Bible Only?* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001.

Carson, D. A. *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979.

White, James R. *The King James Only Controversy.* Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995.

Williams, James B., ed. *From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man.* Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 1999.

_____. *God's Word in Our Hands: The Bible Preserved for Us.* Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2003.

²⁴ The ESV also fits this category, but this writer has omitted it from consideration in this evaluation because he has not yet completed an appropriate survey of this recent translation.