A History of Bible Translation
From the translation of the Old Testament into Greek to modern translations of the Bible
by David Gray

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Introduction

People sometimes ask me when the work of Bible translation will be finished. I know why they’re asking. They want Jesus to come back. They want to know if they’ll still be alive when he does. The problem is that there always has been and always will be Bible translation going on. It isn’t the kind of task you start today, finish sometime next month, and then tick the box and move on. As cultures develop and communities change there is often a need for a new translation. Not only that, language is not static, but always shifting and changing. Therefore previous translations, which may have seemed good at the time, apparently feel out-of-date and irrelevant. On top of that some translations were not very good in the first place. Another question I get asked is why Bible translation takes so long? Why can’t we, in the age of advanced computers and globalisation, speed up the process? The problem is that computers aren’t human, and can’t produce a translation good enough for use by humans. Having said that humans are, after all, only human, and tend to make mistakes, albeit smaller ones than computers. When thinking about Bible translation most people compare it with translations like the New International Version, which had a ‘small’ committee of sixteen famous theologians working on it. Despite that, they took seventeen years to complete version one, and they’ve been producing new versions (of the New International Version) ever since. Comparing that with, at the other extreme, a couple of relatively untrained translators with only primary education working in a village, seems to be taking things too far. Those working with and advising such translators don’t know the language fluently, and the translators often don’t know Hebrew and Greek at all, nor do they know the background of the Bible well enough for the task in hand, therefore there isn’t one person on the project who knows everything they need to know in order to get the job done. The expression, ‘It takes two to tango’ comes to mind. It takes a team to translate. These days there is much more emphasis on training mother-tongue translators at workshops, and providing consultant help at both these and during visits to the team. Nevertheless, work often progresses slowly, and for good reasons.

Few people know how complex the work of Bible translation is. One of the reasons I have written this booklet is to show how difficult it has been to put the Bible into local, spoken languages, and how much opposition to this process there has been. Many translators have died in the saddle, as it were, and not just from old age. Opposition has come from many quarters, including traditionally-minded church leaders who were quite happy with the status quo of having the priests in the know and the laity ignorant of Scripture. Putting the Scriptures into the modern spoken language of the day seemed sacrilege to them. Today opposition is more likely to come from other quarters – governments who are afraid to promote minority languages, or religious leaders who see Bible translation as a missionary activity, designed to cause the growth of local churches amongst communities all over the region. And so it is, as we shall hopefully see.

Philip Noss divides types of translation into three categories:

1. Primary Translations (translated from the original languages i.e. Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic)
2. Secondary Translations (translated from a Primary Translation)
3. Tertiary Translations (translated from a Secondary Translation)

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1 Not good for the purpose they were intended for, that is. This is often because the translators have a hidden agenda, such as promoting the literary language, or competing with a neighbouring tribe. This is all very well, but we need translations that meet a felt need, not ones the boost someone’s ego.

2 The NIV committee spent a lot of time deciding the parameters of the translation they were working on, key terms, and so on. Translations carried out in other parts of the world are often advised to leave decisions on key terms until later in the project, and keep such decisions as flexible as possible, as more data is needed to be able to make such hard choices.

Most of the translations we will be looking at will be in the first category. If not, I will state that clearly.

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Chapter 1 – The Greek Translation of the Old Testament

In the third century BC a king called Ptolemy the 2nd decided it would be a good idea to get the Hebrew Bible translated into Greek for ‘the Jewish community resident outside their own land in the North African commercial and intellectual Hellenistic metropolis of Alexandria.’ He, as the story goes, appointed seventy translators who were told to sit in separate booths and work alone, and at the end of the process all seventy miraculously produced identical translations of the Hebrew Bible. What a way to check for accuracy! This translation became known as the Septuagint, and is one of the most reliable texts of the Old Testament we have, along with the Masoretic Text (10th century AD), and the Dead Sea Scrolls (1st century BC). Sometimes the Dead Sea Scrolls line up with the Septuagint rather than the Masoretic text, showing that in places the Septuagint might possibly represent an earlier and more reliable Hebrew reading than the Masoretic text, despite the latter’s understandable authority in the Judeo-Christian world.

The main reason to be thankful for this translation is that it is the main text alluded to by the writers of the New Testament. By then Greek had established itself as the language of education in the Mediterranean region, despite Roman military dominance, and the use of Aramaic by Jews in the home and on the street, and the use of Hebrew in the synagogues. Why do I say ‘alluded to’ not ‘quoted’? Because the New Testament writers, like Winnie the Pooh, often ‘used’ the Septuagint to mean what they wanted it to, not what it originally communicated in the Hebrew. They felt they had a divine calling to write, and in doing so were writing not just ordinary words, but Scripture. For instance, ‘... it is very common for NT writers to apply an OT passage that refers to YHWH (commonly rendered “LORD” in English Bibles) to Jesus. This arises from the theological conviction that it is entirely appropriate to do so since, granted Jesus’ identity, what is predicated of God can be predicated no less of him.’ The world had changed after both the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and destruction of the temple, and they had a message to share.

This means that the Bible we read is itself dependent on a translation of the older, Hebrew Bible, what we as Christians call the Old Testament. It uses that translation as a stepping stone to move into new territory. Therefore, some missiologists such as Lamin Sanneh have talked about the ‘translatability of Scripture’ – the Bible is inherently a translation, contains translated material, and focuses on a person, Jesus the Messiah, who himself became incarnate, involving a ‘translation’ from heavenly being to human being.

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5 The Soviet Union apparently used to use a word count to check translations were accurate. Perhaps they were from the same stable.
6 The Romans spoke Latin, but were themselves educated in Greek.
7 Most of the New Testament was written after the destruction of the temple in AD 70, so synagogues were the only meeting places for Jewish believers.
Chapter 2 – Early Translations of the Bible

Some of you may be surprised to learn that the King James Version of the Bible wasn’t the first Bible translation. Apart from the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, mentioned above, there are many other versions of the Bible:

The Peshitta – this is the Syriac translation of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). It was probably translated into Syriac in the 2nd century AD.

The Aramaic ‘Targums’ are translations of parts of the Old Testament. ‘They were translated at different times and have more than one interpretive approach to the Hebrew Bible.’

The Vulgate – this is the translation of the Bible into Latin, and was carried out by Jerome in the 4th-5th centuries AD. By then a Latin version of the Bible was very much needed, as Greek was no longer as influential as it had once been. Jerome began to revise an earlier Latin translation called the Old Latin version (Vetus Latina), but found that it was easier to start from scratch, as the Old Testament part of the Old Latin had been translated from the Septuagint, not the Hebrew Bible.

The crazy thing is that the Vulgate was used as the standard Bible to use for liturgical readings from the council of Trent until Vatican II! Latin became the language of the Western church, and remained so until relatively recently. It was only in the 1960s that the Roman Catholic church decided to allow mass to take place in local languages rather than in Latin. The Eastern church continued to use Greek until the advent of the Russian Orthodox Church, and some other Slavic churches, which use Church Slavonic for their liturgy. Of course, most of these churches have readings and sermons, and these were sometimes in local languages, at least in the last couple of centuries. The Russian Orthodox Church today continues to use Church Slavonic for its liturgy, but the sermon is normally in modern Russian, as are the readings.

There were many other early translations of the Bible, amongst them Coptic (3rd-4th Centuries), Gothic (4th century), Georgian (5th century), Armenian (5th century), Caucasian Albanian (5th century), and Ethiopic (6th century). See the Appendix for more information.

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10 By the way there are some important texts that need mentioning here. The Samaritan Pentateuch – this contains the first five books of the Old Testament. The Samaritans only took these books as part of their canon. They also had Damascus as their capital and worship-centres in Dan and Bethel for many years, and were considered a sect by Jews. The Samaritan Pentateuch is not a translation, as such, but an important text, in that it duplicates the ‘Torah’ – the teaching part of the Hebrew Bible. The Dead Sea Scrolls – also not a translation, but an important collection of Hebrew texts, dating back to the 1st century BC. The scrolls were found in a cave in Qumran, so are sometimes known by that epithet. They were remarkably well preserved, given the fact they had been lying there for about twenty centuries before they were discovered. Thankfully the extreme dryness of the climate led to their preservation. Nevertheless, they ended up in fragments, and scholars have been pasting them back together ever since. Still, one or two books, such as Isaiah, are in a very good state.


13 The Old Latin had been translated in the 2nd century AD.

14 Noss, P. A. (2007) A History of Bible Translation. Rome: American Bible Society, p32-33. It is often better (both quicker and easier) to retranslate than to revise, especially if the translation needs heavy editing. The influence of the existing translation remains, which is only a good thing if the translation has gained much respect from the audience.

15 The decision to allow this was made at Vatican II, which took place in Rome, 1962-1965.

16 This dates back to the 9th century.
As for English translations of the Bible – the first was probably by John Wycliffe and his colleagues in the 14th century. He was an Oxford scholar, but also trained up lay preachers and evangelists, and they were encouraged to use a translation of the New Testament from Latin into English made by Wycliffe and others, so that ordinary people could understand them. It was a translation of a translation, since the Bible is written mainly in Hebrew and Greek. He was put on trial, hounded out of Oxford and in constant need of protection by John of Gaunt. After his death he was labelled as a heretic - his bones were dug up, burnt, and thrown in the river Swift. His writings were also burnt. Wycliffe was around at the very beginning of the Reformation, which we will get to in the next chapter.

There were also translations into French, German, Czech and Arabic around this time. Arabic was earlier, in fact. Still, in Europe, at least, the Latin Bible continued to hold sway.

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17 This is, generally speaking, not a good idea, as it is much like making a tape of a tape, in that the number of errors is bound to increase, much like the hiss on a recording increases.
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Chapter 3 – The Reformation

The reformation really got going when Erasmus began a new translation of the New Testament into Latin, based on Greek manuscripts. He decided to produce a ‘definitive’ Greek text of the New Testament, now known as the Textus Receptus or ‘Received Text’. 18 This was not the first Greek New Testament to be printed, but it was the first to be published and widely distributed.19 When Luther saw the new Latin translation, he said to himself, ‘If it’s ok to produce a fresh translation of the Bible into Latin, why not go the whole hog and translate one from Greek (and Hebrew) into German?’ And so the reformation begun. Within a few years Bibles were being translated into a number of European languages. William Tyndale, an Oxford linguist and theologian, began an English version of the New Testament, again working from Greek manuscripts, and within a century this was reworked by a committee commissioned by King James 1st into what we now know as ‘The Authorised Version’ or ‘The King James Version’, also using Miles Coverdale’s edition of the Bible that included the Old Testament. 20 Many of these translators were, or became, leaders in the reformation, and for the first few years there was much persecution. Tyndale himself was executed just a few years before the King of England gave permission for the Bible to be published and distributed in English. The English and German Bibles came out just as the printing press was invented, and so mass distribution of the printed word became a possibility for the first time in history. We are now experiencing a similar revolution with the advent of digital publishing, so can appreciate how quickly such a new method catches on and is used for good to get the Word of God into the hands of many. The publication of these Bibles, in the ordinary spoken language, sometimes known as the ‘vernacular’ or ‘mother tongue’, was a revolutionary move away from the use of Latin in churches, and this created a lot of waves. The strange thing is that we never learn from history – whenever Scriptures are published in the local vernacular it causes controversy amongst many in authority and amongst those who have grown up reading the Bible in a language of wider communication such as Spanish, French, Russian or Classical Arabic or a national language such as Urdu or Tagalog.

The Textus Receptus is still the basis of many Bible translations, though of course it was basically the work of one scholar many centuries ago. Today we have more manuscripts available (such as the Dead Sea scrolls), and more advanced scholarship, so most modern Bible translations are based on Hebrew and Greek texts published by the Bible Societies, though it is usual practice to show variations between those and the Textus Receptus in footnotes, in case someone is worried when they find differences between the modern translation and an older translation such as the King James Version or Luther’s Bible.

Occasionally people ask me whether or not we translate the Bible from the ‘original’, meaning the King James Version. Sadly, I have to disillusion them, and explain that this translation, though the first of its kind in English, was not the ‘original’ Bible. Important though it is in the history of English Bible translation, and indeed in the development of English as a literary language, it is simply a very good 17th century translation. 21 In addition, let’s not forget how much it depended on the work of Tyndale and Coverdale.

18 Though he was very much limited in the manuscripts he had access to, and even translated one or two verses from the Vulgate into Greek where he those texts were lacking in the manuscripts available to him.
19 Metzger, B. M. (1992) The Text of the New Testament. 3rd edn. Oxford: OUP, p98. The first to be printed was the Complutensian text, which was part of a Polyglot Bible printed in 1514.
20 Using the Erasmus’ Greek New Testament, which had been published in 1516.
21 Much of the Old Testament was translated by George Joye. Coverdale himself did not know Hebrew, so was working from translations such as the Septuagint.
22 It was published in 1611. Tyndale and Coverdale’s work had been published in the 1530s, some seventy years earlier.
23 Coverdale’s Bible was actually a combination of work by Tyndale, Joye and others.
Chapter 4 – After the Reformation

There were other translations carried out during the Reformation period. The Bible was translated into Slovene during the 16th century, and into Turkish during the 17th century, albeit by a Polish convert to Islam who was renamed Ali Bey.  

The result of all this translation activity – and I haven’t covered all the languages translated in the reformation period, nor the portions translated then (or since, for that matter) – was that as Christians started to spread around the world as the result of persecution or to trade they took Bibles with them, and began churches, albeit in their mother tongue, which was usually English, Spanish, French and so on. So, the gospel began to reach parts of the world outside Europe such as North America, where many Puritans, both Reformed and Anabaptist, planted churches. This paved the way for the modern missions movement, which has tended to focus on Bible distribution, for very important reasons. Church planters and bible translators are often either the same people, or very closely related to one another i.e. working in close partnership.

Because of this focus on printed books, the main book being the Bible, or parts of it, there has also been a focus on literacy. Without teaching people to read and write how could they have access to the Bible? Indeed, those who become committed followers of Jesus and join churches are positively encouraged to read their Bibles (and pray every day, as the song goes). Mission during this era tended to be centripetal – drawing people into a Mission compound, where they would gain education, join a church, be given work to do, and be generally looked after. Though we now look back on such work as colonialist, it was a product of its age. When the gospel first reached Britain via both Celtic and Roman missionaries, many monasteries were built, and the gospel spread via the work of those monasteries, which had a surprisingly outward focus, at least to when they first started. It’s no surprise, therefore, that reformation and early missions used a similar model.

The real leap forward in terms of both missions and Bible translation began in the 19th century, however, and we will look at that expansion in the next chapter.

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24 This translation was commissioned by the Sultan of Turkey himself.
25 The Greek term for Bible is ho biblos ‘the book’.
26 Though in many cases they will have one gospel, or some other portion of Scripture available, not a whole Bible. Nevertheless, we tend to call this ‘Bible Translation’, even if only a New Testament or mini Bible is published.
27 Or when they were rejuvenated, or new movements began.
Chapter 5 – Nineteenth Century Translations

During the 17th and 18th centuries some Bible translation was carried out in non-European languages, but the main movement forward was in the 19th century. William Carey, of the Baptist Missionary Society, and known as the father of modern missions, began translation work of the New Testament into Hindi and Urdu, and later this was completed by Henry Martyn, the complete Bible being published in 1843. Henry Martyn was a prolific translator, working with local colleagues, and translating the New Testament into several languages: Hindi/Urdu, Persian (Farsi), and Judaeo-Persian. Urdu is an artificial language based on Hindi grammar with many Persian and some Turkic loan words. It was needed by the Mogul hordes from Central Asia who invaded Northern India and built and empire resulting in edifices such as the Taj Mahal. Martyn passed away aged only thirty-one. It’s extraordinary to think that he achieved more before the age of thirty than most of us do in a lifetime.

There were many other translations carried out in the 19th century. A new translation was made in Turkish and published in 1878. After Ataturk’s reforms in the 20th century this version was republished in the new Latin script. The Bible was translated into Russian by the Russian Bible Society, who began work in 1813 and finally published the ‘Synodal Bible’ in 1876. Today it is available in several different formats, for Orthodox and Protestants alike.

The British and Foreign Bible Society was formed in 1804, and although it wasn’t the first ‘Bible Society’, it became the most influential. It’s first project was to publish the Bible in Welsh, the language of Mary Jones, who walked twenty miles to her nearest town, Bala, to obtain a Bible in her mother tongue. The BFBS had a policy of publishing Bibles ‘without note or comment’ due to their non-denominational stance. They believed that the Bible should be available to all, no matter what their background. After the BFBS many other Bible Societies began around the world, all them loosely connected by a global network called the United Bible Societies. The Bible Society exists in many countries, is locally owned, and exists to publish the Bible in the national language and larger minority languages. In some cases they carry out new translations into those languages, as and when they are needed.

Bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther, the first indigenous African bishop, supervised the first translation of the Bible into his mother tongue Yoruba of Nigeria, published in 1884 (the first book published had been Romans, in 1850). The translation committee was made up of both Yorubas and Europeans. Crowther had been trained ‘... in Freetown and in England at Church Missionary Society Colleges.’

The focus during the 19th century tended to be on word-for-word translations, sometimes called ‘literal’, ‘modified literal’, or ‘form-based’ translations. These are not necessarily more accurate, however, and as a result there has been a shift to meaning-based translations over the last century or so. In practice any translation is somewhere on the spectrum between form-based and meaning-based, and also on the spectrum between literary and colloquial. It’s quite possible,

28 They were led by Babur, great-great-great grandson of Timur, known as Tamerlane, who was both Turkic and Mongol in ancestry.
29 From fever, or exhaustion, or both.
30 The Orthodox version contains the Apocrypha.
31 For instance there is a new Russian Bible Society translation known as the Современный русский перевод (Modern Russian translation). It is a meaning-based translation, and complements the Synodal translation.
33 A focus on high style of language, and perhaps a greater emphasis on using poetic forms where appropriate.
however, for a translation to be both meaning-based and literary (and poetic, in places), or form-based and colloquial.

It’s impossible to translate literally. That’s because languages vary in their features: some are separative, some agglutinative. Some tend to put the verb first in a phrase, others last. People use idioms and metaphors all the time when they speak, as language is inherently figurative, and on top of that we now know that communication is pragmatic – we tell people what they need to know and no more – i.e. a lot of communication uses implicatures. Recent studies into cognitive linguistics, relevance theory, and speech act theory show us that communication involves much more than words used in a certain grammatical construction.

34 These stick affixes on words, making them very long, not like German, but like Turkic languages, which often have words eight to ten syllables long. On top of that they are very ‘productive’ in that a certain affix, such as the pluraliser -lar/-ler can be used in a variety of places adding to both nouns and verbs.
Chapter 6 – The Development of the Modern Missions Movement and Modern Bible Translation

The major push that occurred in the 19th century resulted in mission work and Bible translation beginning in many fairly major languages, but it was not until the 20th century that smaller groups and minority languages were considered a need. It has only been in the last one hundred years ago that phrases like ‘every tribe, every nation, every language’ were used to call workers and others into mission work and partnership in it. Statistically, the growth has been astronomical - in A.D. 1000 there were roughly 19 translations of portions of the Bible, but by the year 2000 there were almost 2500, most of which had been translated during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Cameron Townsend started a training programme called ‘Camp Wycliffe’ in the 1930s, to equip those already interested in that field to analyse an unwritten language from first principles. He then founded the Summer Institute of Linguistics (now known as SIL). The early recruits went to Mexico, where they researched and analysed the indigenous languages such as Otomi, Mixtec, Zapotec and Mixe. They lived in villages, worked with ‘language informants’, as they were then known, and produced phonology write-ups, grammars, dictionaries, primers for the orthography (alphabet) they had developed, and also began translating the New Testament into those languages. This was carried out with the permission of the government: SIL worked with mainly governments and universities at that time. Back at home, however, Townsend found that churches were uninterested in ‘all that linguistic stuff’ and he founded a second organisation, Wycliffe Bible Translators.

The work has gone through several paradigm shifts since the early days, and I will try and summarise them here:

1. The first shift was to working with mother-tongue translators, rather than language informants. These translators were encouraged to write up the translation themselves, and either type it up or keyboard it into a computer. They worked alongside the SIL members as equals, rather than subordinates. The community were encouraged to form a language or translation committee, to make decisions about the choice of mother-tongue translators, choice of key terms, layout of the portions published, and so on. In addition, Eugene Nida’s ‘Dynamic Equivalence’ model was used to produce meaning-based translations.

2. The next shift was start up more and more local organisations, led by local people, that would eventually take over the leadership of the work. There was more of an emphasis on training, but this was mainly carried out in partnership with local universities. SIL also began to train local exegetes to advise translators and local consultants to visit the projects.

3. The most recent shift has been for SIL to become a service organisation. This has led to SIL working with many partners: local churches, other mission organisations, other Bible translation agencies, amongst others. In some parts of the world those who join the organisation don’t even become SIL members but remain part of their home Wycliffe organisation, if they have one, and simply partner with a local organisation. In other parts of the world SIL continues to play a role, but in a much more flexible way. The aim is for programmes to be initiated and owned locally, with some input from SIL or Wycliffe members as and when needed. Many translators work independently, carrying out their own exegetical research before making a draft. There are many expatriate consultants based

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35 Rev 7:9.
36 See Noss, p24 for a chart.
37 From Eunice V. Pike’s 1981 biography entitled, Ken Pike: Scholar and Christian (SIL).
38 Nida developed this model, also known as the ‘Code Model’, in the 1960s. He started out as a member of SIL, then worked for the UBS.
39 If they are locals they simply join the local organisation, and may receive a salary.
in their home countries, making trips all over the world to consult for projects. They give input, but don’t have the final say in what goes on in the locally-owned programmes. There is also more of a two-way interaction – the SIL consultants are learning as well as teaching. No one person has access to all the information needed.

The Bible Societies have gone through similar paradigm shifts, with most of their consultants now being based in a local Bible Society and working with projects there. There are also roving trainers, who support such consultants and others involved in the work.

Let us not forget, however, that Bible translation is often carried out by local believers – church-planters and others, who see the need, get stuck in, then realise they need some help and training. In fact that’s the norm, these days. One advantage of SIL and other Bible translation agencies taking more of a back seat (without doing less work, you realise), is that the work can progress much more quickly. In the mid to late nineties SIL realised that at the current rate of progress the work would take a century or more to complete (not that the work is every completed, in one sense). Taking that long was felt to be unacceptable, and we realised we had to open it up to other groups and individuals.

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40 Much of the work these days is focused on training, and working in limited-access areas of the world where programmes need to be started.
Chapter 7 – Post-Colonial Translation and Globalisation; Bible Storying

The decision to move to a more open model of work wasn’t just taken for pragmatic reasons. Missions in general have been realising that we need to move away from colonial approaches, where the foreigners are in control, and away from post-colonial approaches, where the foreigners feel guilty that they are even involved in the work. In these days of globalisation, we can all be involved without anyone feeling guilty or misused in any way. Post-colonial approaches have affected many areas of academic study, including translation. We now realise that languages can be used to adversely influence people (colonialism), and that translators are more than linguists, they are cross-cultural intermediaries (post-colonial approaches and globalisation). For instance, if an interpreter hears something that they consider might be insulting to those they are interpreting for, they might modify what they say and tone it down a bit to make it more acceptable. On top of that we know that the cultures we come from tend to share a body of information, and this might be different in the host culture. Therefore translators naturally make up for these differences by sharing background information in one way or another. In the Bible there are many situations where the narrator supplies two names for a place – perhaps the Aramaic (or Hebrew) and the Greek name, or the old name and the current name (as it was in the narrator’s day). This is so readers can gain background information. Other ways of providing such information is by using maps, pictures, glossaries, footnotes, introductions etc. These are known as the para-text or para-textual helps. New translators are tempted to skip these means of conveying information, but as time goes on they realise the importance of them. In some contexts it might be that the audience need training in how to use such helps. If the translation is mainly for audio only the team need to be very creative in how they are supplied.

The decisions made by a translation team as they go along will often refer back to a project brief that they have agreed with positive stakeholders (i.e. partners) and those in the translation committee. That document should carefully define the audience(s) and the skopos of translation. Roughly translated this means ‘function’ or ‘purpose’. Without a clear idea of the intended audience(s) and the skopos it is quite hard to make good and consistent decisions about translation issues. This project brief also needs input from a Scripture Engagement consultant, who will advise the team, partners and committee on how best to reach the goal of the translated and distributed Scriptures transforming lives. This consultant might refer to Wayne Dye’s Eight Conditions or to the barriers to Scripture Engagement mentioned in Harriet Hill and Margaret Hill’s Translating the Bible into Action.

In the nineties and early two-thousands a mission agency called ‘New Tribes Mission’ realised that it is far more effective to ‘story’ the Bible than to try and teach it in a traditional (to us, i.e. Western, top-down, analytical) way. They started to act it out and this gave birth to a new movement called ‘Bible storying’ which has been very effective in some parts of the world. Many Mission and Bible translation agencies are now involved in Bible storying, and it has resulted in much church growth. Those trained in storying seek to start Bible-storying fellowships, and pass on the stories they have crafted. These then multiply exponentially. The huge advantage is that a) little training is needed b) the story sets can be developed and passed on relatively quickly. That’s not to say that this approach replaces traditional approaches to Bible translation, but it certainly guarantees greater Scripture engagement – lives are transformed and people learn what it is to walk as a believer, without any need for literacy classes, long-term linguistic research, and so on.
Chapter 8 – Translation Process

In addition to learning some history, it might be good to look at how translations are actually carried out these days - a kind of looking to the future, or explaining the present.\(^{41}\) This varies somewhat from region to region, and organisation to organisation, and also depends on project personnel and their gifts, abilities and training, but roughly speaking we have the following process:

1. **Drafting**
2. **Team check**
3. **Exegetical check**
4. **Test & Review**

Lastly a consultant meets with the team and discusses any translation issues, making suggestions for changes before it is published.

I’m now going to unpack why each stage is needed and what happens during each stage.

1. **Draft**: the translator studies the passage, preferably in the original language, but if not, s/he compares several different versions in several different languages, and makes an oral draft (or sometimes they listen to several different audio versions instead). They do this by closing all their books, if they have any open, then speaking the passage into a recording device (like a smartphone). At least two-to-three verses are drafted at a time, then the translator listens to their recording, and checks they haven’t left anything out. They might then keyboard it into their computer, using a program called ‘Paratext’. Why do we draft orally? Because a) many cultures are oral in their preference (and much of Scripture was oral too) b) it results in a much more natural translation than other methods, and means that study of the discourse analysis of the receptor language isn’t so necessary.

2. **Team Check**: the other translators listen to (or read) the translation and make comments on it. This helps make sure that the translators are all using the same key terms, and are reasonable consistent in terms of style and level of their translation. They also need to be on the same page in terms of when to insert footnotes, what kind of glossary entries are needed, and so on. In fact at this stage it’s a good time to work on all those para-textual helps. The other translators can also help with naturalness of the translation at this stage, of course.

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\(^{41}\) In the past the foreign ‘translator’ would sit with a local ‘informant’ and carry out the translation. Since the emphasis is more on national translators at the moment, any foreigners involved tend to work as exegetical and translation advisors, or as consultants, rather than as translators. Of course the ideal is for the translator to be able to work independently, without having to rely on input from an exegete.
3. Exegetical check: if the translator doesn't work from the original languages, then someone needs to carefully read the translation and compare it with the Hebrew/Aramaic/Greek Scriptures to make sure the translation is accurate and communicates the correct meaning. The exegetical advisor may also comment on any key terms and consistency issues, as in stage 2.

4. Test & Review: the 3rd draft is sent to reviewers, who may be experts in the language or pastors/believers, for them to comment on the draft. This makes the translation more acceptable, both in terms of its orthography, and its theological appropriateness, as well as usefulness for the purpose it was intended for, whether use in church or outreach. It is also taken out into the community for 'testing' - this is where the translation is checked for clarity and comprehensibility. The more testing that can be done the better, and this is great Scripture engagement as well as being an important checking stage. Some hearers may comment on parts of the translation that sound unnatural, or where the translation is woodenly literal, and such problems can be fixed at this stage. The 4th draft is the final draft that is consultant checked...

Finally a consultant meets with the team, whether face-to-face or by Skype, and helps the team improve the translation to the point where it is publishable. This means that before the consultant visits the introduction needs to be written, the glossary updated, and all the maps and pictures prepared. Also the consultant may not know the language, in which case someone (not a translator, preferably), makes a fairly literal back-translation into English, Russian, French, or another language of wider communication, so that the consultant can see where there are idioms and metaphors and ask what those communicate, and also comment on issues of accuracy, good communication (clarity), and so on. After this the translation is published digitally (audio recordings, Bible apps, etc.) and also sometimes in print format.

There are those who say that this can all be sped up in some way, but this usually involves missing out one or more of the above stages, which I hope you can see are all important for good quality translations. How many translators are needed? Probably two-to-three is an ideal number. If you have more then the discussions during the team check stage can take for ever, and lead to a lot of arguments about key terms issues. One organisation I know of is experimenting with using thirty or so translators, which is great for buy-in to the translation, but a nightmare in terms of consistency.

The pastors/believers involved in the reviewing process may or may not be members of the translation committee, which meets periodically to decide issues like which portions/passage of Scripture to work on next, how to raise funds to pay the translators, testers, and other team members, and discuss important key terms issues. The exegetical advisor and/or consultant will have input regarding key terms, as its important to know the various ideas communicated in Hebrew/Greek before translating them.

I mentioned discourse analysis above. This is a study of the phrase order used in the language, and of various particles and words that might communicate something at a high level in the language. An example in English is the word 'well' when it begins a sentence. e.g.

What do you think we should do tomorrow?

Well...

An example in Hebrew is the word hine, often translated 'behold' in older translations. It is a discourse marker, highlighting something important about to be said (or seen).
Chapter 9 – A Relevance Theory Approach to Drafting

One of the current theories behind modern translation work is Relevance Theory. Here is a flow chart that explains the process often used to produce a draft when using such an approach:

---

*Make sure your translation committee makes the decision as to what kind of translation they want.

A domesticated translation is one that submits to dominant values in the receptor language whereas a foreignized translation is one that is happy to import foreign terms and ideas from Hebrew, Greek, or the language of wider communication such as the Greek term *baptizo*.

---


A History of Bible Translation

The chart looks something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Communicated Ideas</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A sower went out to sow</td>
<td>A farmer went out to sow grain</td>
<td>People scattered/threw seed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The text has very little information, but behind it is the idea that seed was scattered by throwing it from a bag carried round the farmer’s shoulder. This could be explained in the para-textual helps if you are in a project that is more foreignized than domesticated.

Actually the above is a little simplified, in that you could, in theory, have a domesticated translation which also has para-textual helps, or a foreignized translation without such helps, like so:

Translation Options:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Foreignized</th>
<th>Domesticated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Without para-textual helps</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With para-textual helps</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hopefully very few audiences will choose option 1!

**Key**

- SL Source Language
- RH Right hand
Chapter 10 - Relevance Theory and Testing Translations

In Katy Barnwell's otherwise excellent 'Ten Ways to Test a Translation' we are advised not to ask any questions that ask for the opinions of the hearer, only factual questions should be asked. Certainly we don't want to ask, 'Is this a good translation?' Nor do we want to ask, 'What do you think of the translation?' We might, however, want to ask, 'Why, in your view, did Jonah run away from the Lord?' when testing Jonah 1. This is because it finds out if the hearer has understood the main point of the plot in chapter 1, despite the fact that this is only implied, not openly stated. Jonah is running away from the Lord because Nineveh is a major Babylonian (Iraqi) city full of non-Jews who might want to kill him. Not only that, we later find out that Jonah doesn't even want the Ninevites to repent. His view is that they deserve punishment simply for being non-Jews, and therefore non-believers. He is falling into the religious trap of being judgmental, like the older brother in the Prodigal Son story.

The reason we want to ask people's opinions is that, as Relevance Theory has taught us, most communication includes implicatures (implied information) as well as explicatures (stated information). If we ignore the former and concentrate only on the latter we do a disservice to the aims of the original speaker (author) of the utterance or text we’re studying and wanting to translate.

Many stories, jokes, poems and proverbs rely on implicatures. Here's a joke for you:

Mother: Anton, do you think I'm a bad mother?

Son: My name is Paul.

What's the implicature? She's such a bad mother that she doesn't even know her sons name. If you explain that, as I have just done, you destroy the joke. Why? Because the hearer has to do some work if you leave the implicature as an implicature, rather than stating it explicitly. This gives the joke greater impact.

That's why, in Bible Translation, we test for people's opinions - we want to know if they have understood the implicatures, and we also want to know if the story will have the same impact as the original story had (and that the author intended). It is better to leave implicatures as implicatures, and test to see if they have been understood, than to explicate them without good reason, and in so doing removing the translation’s impact.
A History of Bible Translation

Bibliography


Useful Links

Websites you may like to look at for further information

Bible Gateway
https://www.biblegateway.com/

Bible Society (UK)
https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/
https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/about-us/our-history/

SIL
https://www.sil.org/

Blog on Scripture Engagement
http://scripture-engagement.blogspot.co.uk

Scripture Engagement website
http://www.scripture-engagement.org/

Wycliffe Bible Translators (Global stats., UK)
http://www.wycliffe.net/statistics
https://www.wycliffe.org.uk/
# Appendix - A List of Bible Translations Through History

Compiled by Andreas Holzhausen, edited by David Gray

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Century Year</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BC</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>225* Pentateuch in Greek (Septuagint)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>130* Complete OT in Greek (Septuagint)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>100* OT in Syriac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>? OT in Aramaic (Targums)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AD</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>150* First Latin translation (Vetus Latina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>200* Gospels in Syriac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>? Coptic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>? Ethiopian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>350 Gothic Bible of Wulfilas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>406 Vulgate (Latin) by Hieronymus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>? Armenian, Georgian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>630* Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>800* First known translation into a Germanic dialect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>850* Slavonic&lt;sup&gt;44&lt;/sup&gt; by Cyril +.Methodius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>? First known translation into Arabic of the Torah, known as <em>Tafsir</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>? Psalms in German by the monk Notker Labeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>? Bible in Provencal, Piemontese, German by the Waldensians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th</td>
<td>? S. Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, divides the Bible into chapters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th</td>
<td>1310* First complete Bible in Germany by Marchwart Biberli in Zürich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1388 English Bible by John Wycliffe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th</td>
<td>1440 Invention of printing with movable types by Gutenberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1456 The first printed Bible (Latin) by Gutenberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1474 French Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1475 Czech Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1477 Dutch Bible (Delfter Bibel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1478 Bible in Catalan (Spain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th</td>
<td>1516 Reconstruction of the text of the Greek NT by Erasmus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1517 Bible in Russian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>44</sup> Slavonic is the language from which modern Slavic languages eminate.
1516  Arabic
1521  French Bible (Le Vevre, Cath.)
1521  Luther translates the NT into German at the Wartburg castle
1522  Polish Bible
1531  Zwingli Zürcher Bibel durch
1534  Luther completes the whole Bible in German
1523  Dutch Bible
1523  English NT by William Tyndale
1530  NT Italian (Cath.)
1535  English (Coverdale)
1535  French Bible by Olivetan (Genfer Bibel)
1538  Italian Bible
1540  Ungarian
1541  Swedish
1543  NT Spanish
1550  Danish
1557  English (Geneva Bible)
1561  Polish
1561  Rätoromanisch (Engadin)
1563  Croatian
1569  Spanish Bible (de Reina)
1568  Englisch (Bishop's Bible)
1584  Lithuanian
1584  Icelandic
1584  Slovenian
1584  Romanian
1588  Welsh
17th  1611  English: King James Bible
1612  Translation of Matthew into Malay by Dutchman Albert Cornelisz Ruyl
1662  Malay NT by D Brouwerious
1663  First translation on the (currently) USA mission field: John Eliot Massachusets-Indians
16??  Ali Bey's translation of the Bible into Turkish, which is the first of its kind
18th  1710  Founding of the first Bible Society: v. Canstein in Halle, Germany
1727  First translation in Idia: Tamil by German missionary Ziegenbalg
1733  First Malay Bible by Leijdecker
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1734  First critical edition of the Greek NT by J. A. Bengel
1766  Greenland Eskimo NT by Hans Egede
19th
1801  Bengali Bible by William Carey.
1804  Founding of the “British & Foreign Bible Society”
1814  NT in Urdu by Henry Martyn, by him also:
1815  NT in Persian (both of these published posthumously)
1816  First translation in Africa: Bullom in Sierra Leone
1820  Chinese by Robert Morrison
1830  Malagasy Bible
1840  Burmese by Adoniram Judson
1845  Bible in Persian
1868  Swahili Bible
1873  Mandarin-Chinese
1883  Zulu Bible (portions 1837 onwards)
1884  Yoruba Bible by Bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther
1888  Japanese
20th
1930s  Shawiya-Berber portions
1934  Cameron Townsend translates the NT into Cakchikel in Guatemala
1942  Founding of Wycliffe Bible Translators
1949  Bible Societies worldwide form the United Bible Society
21st
2012  Chechen Bible published
2016  Turkmen, Uzbek, Tatar and Crimean Tatar Bibles all published in the same year!
2018  By now the Bible or parts of it have been translated into 3350 languages. See http://www.wycliffe.net/en/statistics for the latest statistics.

*= exact date unknown