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Ten ways of testing your translation
(Notes on Translation 100: 36-44)

Katharine Barnwell

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TEN WAYS OF TESTING YOUR TRANSLATION

Katharine Barnwell

[Dr. Katharine Barnwell has an M. A. in English Languages and Literature from the University of St. Andrews and a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University
TEN WAYS OF TESTING YOUR TRANSLATION

College, London. She began work with SIL in 1964 in Nigeria where she worked in the Mbembe translation project. From 1973-76, she was responsible for the language projects of SIL in Nigeria, and from 1976-79, continued in Nigeria as translation consultant for the Nigeria Bible Translators Trust. She has served as International Translation Consultant for a number of years, authored text books on translation, prepared Translator’s Aids, and led workshops and seminars on translation. Katharine is currently serving as Senior Translation Consultant for the Africa Area.

Why is it necessary to test a translation?

a. To find out whether the translation communicates to ordinary people in the language area.

b. To find out whether the translation is communicating the true meaning, and whether people find the translation easy to understand, and whether the language is natural.

c. To find ways of improving the translation.

WAYS OF TESTING THE TRANSLATION

1. Reading the Translation Aloud

Often, when you read the translation aloud, you will notice things which you had not noticed when you looked at the translation on the page. You will notice when something “sounds wrong”. So,

a. When the translator has finished a section of the translation, he should read it aloud to himself, listening to hear how it sounds.

b. He should also read the translation aloud to someone else, maybe a friend or someone in his household. Ask that person to point out things which sound unclear or unnatural.

c. As well as reading the translation through as soon as he has translated it, the translator should also read the translation aloud a few days later. He may then notice some points which he did not notice the first time.

d. Sometimes the translator (or someone else) reads the translation into a cassette, so that people can hear the translation as well as read it. Several translators have said that, as they practised reading the translation, preparing to record it onto the cassette, they noticed mistakes in the translation which they had not noticed before. Try this.

2. Listening to Readers

The purpose of this test is to find out which parts of the translation people find difficult to read. If someone finds a passage difficult to read, it is usually because
a. the meaning was not clear, or
b. the language used was unnatural and unexpected.

WHENEVER YOU USE THIS TEST, MAKE IT VERY CLEAR TO THE READER THAT YOU ARE NOT TESTING HIS READING (TO SEE IF HE IS A GOOD READER); RATHER, THAT YOU ARE TESTING THE TRANSLATION, TO SEE IF THE TRANSLATION IS GOOD OR NOT.

Method:

a. Choose some sample sections to test. These can be any section, but
   1. Choose sections which are fairly complete in themselves (e.g. an incident in the life of Jesus, or a parable).
   2. Start with fairly easy passages. Later you can do the same test with more difficult passages.

b. Type out the sections to be tested with some carbon copies.

c. Give the reader one copy, and ask him to read it aloud (without stopping to study it first).

d. The one who is making the test keeps one copy. He listens to the person reading. As he listens, he makes a mark on his copy every time that the reader makes a mistake or hesitates.

e. Repeat the test with several different readers. (Make sure that the reader does not hear anyone else reading the passage before he reads it himself.)

   The person making the test uses only one copy on which to make the marks. Thus, all the marks are written on one copy.

How to use the results:

Several marks at the same point show that several readers made a mistake at that same point. This shows that there is something which is not good in the translation at that point:

   - maybe the meaning is not clear,
   - maybe an unnatural expression has been used,
   - maybe a word which is not known well has been used.

Study the translation to discover the cause and correct the translation. Also check the rest of the translation to see whether similar mistakes have been made in other places.

Things to watch for:

If there is something which is unnatural in the translation, sometimes the reader may "read" a form which is more natural, and which might in fact fit better in that place.

There may be some "ambiguity" (i.e. possible other meaning) in the text, because of the tone of words, or for some other reason. If a reader
mispronounces a word so that the meaning is changed from what the translator intended, this shows that the translation is not clear.

REMEMBER Always make it clear to the reader that you are not testing the way he reads. Explain carefully that you are looking for ways to make the translation better.

3. **Tell-it-Again**

The purpose of this test is to discover places in the translation where the meaning is not clear, or where a wrong meaning is implied.

Method:

a. Take a fairly short passage (about three verses at a time).

b. Read this to someone who does not already know the story. Or, if the person is able to read, let him read the story.

c. Ask the person to retell what has just been read, using his own words. It is helpful to record what he says, if possible.

Listen and notice:

1. Whether any part of the meaning is missed out—maybe that part was not clear.

2. Whether the person has understood something different from what the translator intended to be understood—this also shows that the translation is not clear.

3. Maybe the person uses some good expressions to retell the meaning—note these down; perhaps some of them can be used in the translation to make the translation more clear and natural.

d. Repeat the test with several different people (but do not ask anyone to retell a passage which he has already heard someone else retelling).

If more than one person misunderstands a certain passage in the same way, this shows that the passage is definitely unclear.

The test can also be used with a group of people. Discussion between the people in the group often brings interesting points to light.

The advantage of using a tape-recorder to record the retelling, if possible, is that the recording can be replayed later. The person doing the test then has another opportunity to note down any expressions which he did not have time to write down during the testing session.

4. **Questions and Answers**

The purpose of this test is to find out whether the meaning of the translation is clear and accurate.
Method:

a. Choose a passage and prepare a list of questions on some of the facts of the passage.

The questions should be fairly short; they should be questions which require a short, factual answer.
Do not use questions which ask for opinions.
Do not use questions to which someone can answer just "yes" or "no".

Sample Questions—on Mark 2:1-12:

Where was Jesus standing while he was preaching?
Who was listening to him?
Who came there and wanted to reach him?
Why could they not reach him?
What did they do?
What did Jesus say to the paralyzed man? etc.

There are sets of questions prepared in English for some Bible books. These will help you in preparing questions in your own language.

b. Read the passage to someone (or to a group of people) and ask them to answer the questions. The person making the test should note down the answers which are given.

Or, if the person who is helping is able to read, he can write down his answers.

c. Repeat with several other people.

How to use the results:

If a certain question is answered wrongly by several different people, this shows that the text is not clear at that point.

REMEMBER As with other texts, explain carefully to everyone who is answering the questions, that you are not testing them (to see if they are clever or have the right answer), but rather, that you are testing the translation, to find out if it is good.

5. Alternative Versions

Sometimes the translator is not sure whether a certain expression he has used is good. Or maybe he has two possible expressions and wants to know which would be best. The purpose of this test is to see which of two or more versions is most acceptable and understandable to those who hear the translation.

Method:

a. Do not just give one version and say, "Is this good?". People will usually answer "yes" whether it is good or not. Instead, give two alternative translations, and ask, "Which is better?"
b. The alternatives can be presented to several different people to find out whether all tend to prefer the same alternative or not.

This method can also be used with a group of people. It may give rise to useful discussion. Sometimes people may suggest another alternative which is better than either of those suggested. Such suggestions should be carefully noted.

6. Guessing Test

The purpose of this test is to find out whether the translation is natural and easy to understand.

Method:

a. Choose any passage from the translation. (To begin with, choose a fairly easy passage. Choose something which is complete in itself.)

b. Cross out lightly every eighth word in the translation.

c. Read the translation to people, leaving a blank for every eighth word. Ask the people helping to guess the missing word.

If the helpers are able to read, you can prepare a written copy of the passage, leaving a blank space for every eighth word. You can then give the test to several people to do at the same time.

How to use the results:

If people can guess as many words on the translation as they can on a similar passage of natural, untranslated text, this indicates that the translation is probably fairly natural.

7. Reviewers

The Reviewers are usually educated people, church leaders, and others who have been appointed by the local churches to help in checking the translation.

Copies of the translation are sent to the Reviewers, usually a few chapters at a time. The Reviewers write their comments and suggestions for improvement on the copy, and send this back to the translator.

Sometimes the Reviewers may meet in small groups to do this checking work together.

For further details on the work of the Reviewers, see the section on Reviewers in the paper "Planning a Bible Translation Project".

The translator may also find it helpful to sit down with Reviewers in order to discuss passages of the translation.
8. Back Translation

The purpose of this test is to find out whether the translation does in fact communicate the meaning which the translator aims to communicate.

Method:

Ask a native speaker of the language, who also speaks English (or some other major language), to make a word-for-word key to the translation.

This key will show what the person making the key understands the meaning of the translation to be. This can then be compared with the source text to see if it is accurate.

Warning:

The person making the word-for-word key should be

a. someone other than the person who translated that passage,

b. preferably someone who is not very familiar with the Bible (otherwise he may write the key from his previous knowledge of the passage, rather than from the translation itself), and

c. he should make the key without referring to any English version of the Bible.

The key serves a double purpose. As well as being used as a way of checking the translation, it can be used by the consultant in consultant checking sessions.

9. Trial Version

A trial version is usually prepared after other ways of testing and checking have been used. The translator has gathered the comments and suggestions which have come through this testing, has sorted them out, and made his REVISED DRAFT.

This revised draft is typed onto stencils and duplicated as the trial version. Trial versions should always be clearly marked as "trial", and should be accompanied by a note inviting further comments and suggestions, to be sent to the translator.

This trial version is sent out to church leaders and also to others; in fact, to anybody who is willing to read and use the translation.

The way in which this trial version is used, and the reaction which people have to it, will help the translator to know whether the translation is now nearly ready for publication.

Pastors and teachers and others should be encouraged to use the trial versions as much as possible.
10. Use of the Translation in Bible Study Groups

When the translation is used in Bible Study Groups, also family devotional times and fellowship meetings, this can be a very good way of discovering whether people are really understanding it or not.

Method:

Lead or join a series of Bible studies on the book you have been translating. This should be an informal study group so that people are able to ask questions and discuss freely.

Listen carefully to see whether people understand the translation. Note down places where the meaning is not understood.

GENERAL NOTES ON TESTING THE TRANSLATION

1. Start testing early on in the translation project. What you discover through testing the first passages translated will help you to make a better first draft of later passages.

2. Test widely - with Christians and non-Christians,
   - with young and old, men and women,
   - with those who are able to read and those who are not.

3. Keep a careful chart showing which passages you have tested, and in which ways.

   Every passage should be tested by method 1 (reading aloud), method 7 (Reviewers), and method 9 (use). In addition, each passage should be tested by at least three other methods.

   Difficult passages may need to be tested, revised, and retested several times.

4. The translator should also keep an organized record of all the comments and suggestions which have been made. Keep a KEY COPY and record on it all the changes which it has been agreed to make. Also keep a FILE for each Bible book in which all the notes and reports from checking that book are kept. This is important as the information can otherwise easily be lost. If all notes are put immediately in the file for the book concerned, then they will be ready and available when the time comes to make the revised draft.

REMEMBER  Proper testing is an important part of the translation work.

REMEMBER  Ten ways of testing your translation:

1. Reading aloud
2. Listening to readers
3. Tell-it-again
4. Questions and answers
5. Alternative versions
6. Guessing test
7. Reviewers
8. Back-translation
9. Trial version
10. Use of the translation in Bible study groups

FOR FURTHER READING