

**Digital Resources**



# **Journal of Translation 17:1**

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Freddy Boswell

## ***Bible Translation***

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Paul McLarren

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## Editor's Foreword

It is my pleasure to welcome our readers to the 17th volume of SIL's *Journal of Translation*. This publication release marks a change of editorship from David Frank to myself. I am grateful for David's leadership over the last several years. I was actually the editor of volume 1, number 1 in 2005, but not long thereafter, was moved to other duties. A lot has changed in the publishing world since then, and I am learning much in my new responsibilities! I also express appreciation to assistant editor Drew Maust, who has joined me in leading this effort. Drew brings excellent insights, translation consultant and scholarship experience, and a wealth of digital expertise to our launch.

We have constituted a new Editorial Board, and I am grateful to this distinguished group of ten colleagues for their willingness to serve in this capacity. I am confident that many of the readers of the *Journal* will recognize one of more of their names and will know that our board members offer significant distinction and experience in this field of study.

While SIL is widely recognized for its expertise, involvement, and leadership in Bible translation matters over a period now stretching to eighty years, JOT is not just a journal with Bible translation in focus. Recalling wording from a similar type forward I wrote for JOT 1(1): "It is a peer-reviewed, academic e-journal which incorporates recent investigations and discoveries not only in translation but also in related areas of study." Additionally, articles are invited in other areas of translation, apart from those of the world's most translated book. Bible translators have much to learn from the growing academic domain of translation, and it is our aim to include such research efforts in the *Journal*.

Here in JOT 17(1), we feature an interview with a long-time, highly esteemed leader in the Bible translation world, Dr. Katy Barnwell. We plan to publish in each issue an interview with distinguished leaders in this field, as we want this wealth of knowledge and experience to be catalogued and shared widely! We are delighted to publish an article on figurative language, authored by Rachelle Wenger, featuring a west African context. And we also share an announcement brief from Paul McLarren on the Key Terms Old Testament project. While the number of articles is fairly select at this point, our new editorial team took up the task just a few months ago and we have been focusing heavily on building processes and protocols. We are pleased with how those have come into place, and also that we do have a good number of articles and reviews in process for the March 2022 issue.

Our publishing schedule will be two issues per year, releasing in March and October. Also, if necessary, and following the lead of some other e-journals, we

will have rolling releases of articles that are not quite ready for the designated month of release, but which will be contributions to that volume.

We invite your correspondence regarding article submissions, queries, suggestions, and feedback at [editor\\_JOT@sil.org](mailto:editor_JOT@sil.org).

Freddy Boswell

# ***Bible Translation***

## **An Interview with Katy Barnwell**

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**Abstract:** In June 2020, senior translation consultant and author Katharine “Katy” Barnwell met virtually with Drew Maust and Lynell Zogbo for an interview discussing her classic textbook *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course in Translation Principles*, now available in a thoroughly revised and expanded fourth edition. Barnwell shares about her personal journey, the evolution of her textbook, and significant challenges and changes facing the Bible translation movement. In this article, the authors offer readers an enhanced transcript of that interview.

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**Drew Maust (DM):** We are pleased to have our special guest Katy Barnwell with us today. Special thanks to Lynell Zogbo for agreeing to lead the interview. If you have done any reading on the history of Bible translation in Africa, you will have come across Lynell’s name. She is a very prolific author. She earned her PhD in linguistics from UCLA and has served for over thirty years as a translation consultant with the United Bible Societies (UBS). She’s supposedly retired now, but I’m not sure whether to believe that, because she just keeps churning out *Translator’s Handbooks* both in English and French. One thing to note about Lynell is that she loves poetry, especially Hebrew poetry. She pours herself into her work, writing helps in French for those who wish to translate Hebrew poetry into their language. Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Katy and Lynell.

**Lynell Zogbo (LZ):** I would like to introduce our main event for today, Katharine Barnwell, but known to most people as Katy. She's been involved in Bible translation since 1963. She began with Wycliffe Bible Translators working on Mbembe in Cross River State, Nigeria. She did her PhD on the grammar of that language, finishing in 1970. She has spent most of her career as a teacher, trainer, and translation consultant. She has worked with SIL International and the Seed Company, where she now serves as senior translation consultant. Most of you have probably either been in a workshop with or taught by Katy, or at least have read her articles and books. I don't think there's anyone in SIL, Lutheran Bible Translators (LBT), UBS, the Seed Company, Pioneer Bible Translators—any of those—who have not been in contact with Katy's thinking, writing, and teaching. We're very honoured to have her with us today. Welcome, Katy, and may God bless this time as we discuss together.

**DM:** Today we are celebrating the newly released fourth edition of Katy's book, *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course in Translation Principles* (SIL International, 2020), the publication of which prompted this event. We're very grateful to Katy for accepting to discuss not only the book, but Bible translation more generally.

I want to answer two common questions that SIL Publications has received related to the release of this book. The first is when can we expect an electronic version? They're working on it, and they hope to have it out by the end of 2021. So, we're going to keep our fingers crossed, hoping that it gets out very, very soon. I know it'll be very popular.

Second, a lot of people have been asking about translations of the book. I know there's a French translation of the third edition, which is much appreciated. I believe there's also a German version, a Spanish version, and others. A lot of people want to know how long they must wait until this book is translated into their mother tongue. SIL Publications has said that they are currently negotiating translations. They request that those who are interested in having it translated into a specific language reach out to them and express interest in that language, letting Sales know how they might be able to facilitate that process. You can write to them at [sales\\_intl@sil.org](mailto:sales_intl@sil.org), and they will follow up with you.

**LZ:** Before we start in on questions about this new edition of your book, I thought we could start with a few personal questions. We'd like to hear a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, and most importantly, how you got interested in Bible translation and ended up in Africa.

**Katy Barnwell (KB):** I grew up in the United Kingdom, moving around quite a bit. During my school days, I lived in Rotherham, Inverness, Shrewsbury, and eventually Goring-on-Thames, which has become my long-term home. This was

because my father was an engineer and worked in different locations to facilitate new developments. I grew up in a church-going Anglican family. I still have my first Bible, which was given me on my fourth birthday by my grandmother. I had two great aunts who were very influential in my life. They were sisters and they told me that they'd prayed for me every day since I was christened. I have much to be thankful for.

It was when I was at university that I became a committed believer and began to study my Bible seriously. That was also where I heard about Bible translation. George Cowan visited the Christian Union and when I heard about the need for Bible translation and what was involved, I immediately knew in my heart, "this is for me." I took the first Wycliffe training course in the summer of 1960, with John Bendor-Samuel as Director. The next year, I taught on the course; that was the way it was in those days.

John B-S, as he was known, was very influential. He guided me in registering with the School of Oriental and African Studies for PhD studies. My supervisor was M.A.K. Halliday, who developed the theory of structure-function grammar, analysing the relationship between form and meaning in a language. What better training could you have for Bible translation! At that time, John B-S was in the process of opening up SIL work in Africa; previously SIL had been working mainly in the Americas. So, my partner Pat and I were among the first few teams assigned to Nigeria, specifically to the Mbembe language of Cross River State. The first step was to learn to speak the language and collect texts.

**LZ:** Thank you. That is a wonderful story. Many of us, too, could speak to how J.B.S.—John Bendor-Samuel—influenced our lives and Bible translation. Speaking of the Mbembe, last year in Jerusalem, I had some Nigerian students, and I believe they were speakers of languages related to Mbembe. What happened in that work? Did you finish a translation? Is there ongoing work? How are things going in the Mbembe project?

**KB:** The New Testament was published in the major dialect, Mbembe-Adun, in 1985. There was a request early on for more translation, but in those days, Old Testament translation wasn't encouraged. It was only later that the way opened for Old Testament translation. The best way forward for this was clearly to get some Mbembe speakers trained. So, two men who are now leading translators studied at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria, including studies in Biblical Hebrew. One of them earned an MA with Hebrew specialisation. He's now the coordinator for the project. So, there's much to be thankful for. The OT is still in progress. It really only started in 2016. That's when it got underway. I've been making visits back to the Mbembe area to work with the teams as consultant, but currently I'm doing distance checking with them over Zoom.



There are three Mbembe projects now because, after the NT was published in Mbembe-Adun, the two other main dialects wanted their own translation. In fact, when the original survey was done, it was touch and go as to whether it would be considered as three different languages or as three dialects of one language. The dialects are indeed very different. The way we are working is that I check the passage with the teams in two of the dialects.

The leading translator of one of those dialects then checks the third dialect with myself reviewing. The two leading translators are both being mentored as consultants-in-training. So, there is indeed ongoing work. There is an active translation committee. The revision of the 1985 Mbembe-Adun New Testament is also in process, and work continues on an Mbembe-English dictionary, now including variants in all three main dialects.

**LZ:** That's a wonderful model for us to follow. I'm glad to hear it. Let's now move on to this new edition of your book that we're all excited to eventually see. How did the idea for the revision come about? Did you get feedback on the earlier editions? How did you go about revising? How long did it take?

**KB:** That's a load of questions! The main motivation was that I could see that there have been many changes in the Bible translation world over the last fifty years. And so I knew that revisions were needed. Then the SIL International publications department approached me saying that they wanted to do a new printing. They gave me the chance to revise. I don't think they expected me to do quite such an extensive revision, but that's the way it worked out. There was a lot to change, but it's more of an expansion, I would say; the basic principles are still the same.

**LZ:** How long did it take?

**KB:** Because I wasn't working on it full time, it took around two and a half years. With other responsibilities going on, it has taken quite a while. Conforming to the required formatting also took time.

**LZ:** Has the audience changed in your view from when you first wrote the book until now?

**KB:** The primary audience is still mother-tongue translators. Of course, nowadays virtually all translators are mother-tongue translators. Maybe we don't need that term anymore. But I recognise that today translators are typically much more highly educated than they were in 1975 when the first edition was published. In the year 1975 a lot of new things were happening. National responsibility and national Bible translation organisations were starting up. We were seeing the potential for people to translate into their own languages, realising that translations are much better done by speakers of the language. So, we developed

an introductory course in applied linguistics, guiding speakers in how to analyse and develop an orthography for your own language, as well as an introductory course in translation principles to show how to translate into your own language. The 1975 version was the textbook for that course. Then the second (1978) and third editions (1986) were expanded, with more examples and exercises.

**LZ:** How is the fourth edition different from previous editions? There are many issues we could talk about. The first I would ask is, does this book still have exercises and the like? Have you expanded them?

**KB:** Yes, it has exercises. In fact, it has an increased number of exercises. I've tried to grade them from easy to more difficult—or more challenging, I should say. Also, there's more practice in writing your own language, writing creatively, and studying and discovering how your own language works, especially discourse-level features. That's important. Also, there is more attention to the Old Testament and more OT examples. When I'm checking OT translations now, I keep finding illustrations of a principle, saying to myself, "That'll be a good one for the book," but then I think, "Oh, it's too late now."

**LZ:** A lot has happened—a lot of water under the bridge as they say—in translation theory and practice. What is your own view on translation theory? Do you still believe in dynamic or functional equivalence? What is your theoretical approach in the book?

**KB:** Nida's basic principles still hold good. The fundamental principles have not changed. One of the requests that I had about the book was a complaint from someone that the book didn't have anything about relevance theory. Well, of course, "relevance theory" didn't even exist when the first edition was written, but I have now included a couple of chapters with interaction and input from Ernst August-Gutt. But I'd say that's not a change; it's an additional insight rather than a change to the basic principles.

**LZ:** Did I see that there's now a website connected to the book?

**KB:** Yes. At the end of each chapter, there is a section called "online materials"<sup>1</sup> with links to PowerPoints, videos, and other resources. There's also a section listing suggestions for further reading. Gayle Sheehan is the one who worked out how to put these materials on the web. I think it's quite exciting—it has potential for expansion too. You can jump to the PowerPoints and handouts (what used to be handouts) and watch a few videos. Several of the "further reading" items have direct links, so you can jump to the article in *The Bible Translator* or wherever and read the article. I hope it will help and encourage people to use those resources,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.sil.org/resources/publications/bibletranslation\\_additionalmaterials/](https://www.sil.org/resources/publications/bibletranslation_additionalmaterials/).

especially more advanced students. For example, it can help biblical scholars who are preparing to help with exegetical checking and so on. It's designed to provide easy access to further resources. I would hope that one day we'll be able to get it to link with Translator's Workplace although that hasn't happened yet, but hopefully in the future. There is huge scope for enterprising consultants to develop many more systematic online training resources.

**LZ:** It sounds very modern. I admire you for being on top of all these high-tech ways of linking things up. That's wonderful.

**KB:** Well, as I say, it was Gayle who worked out the technical way to link the resources. There's been a lot of partnership in this.

**LZ:** One area I also wanted to ask about is that we always say that we want faithful, natural, and comprehensible translations. Do you think that still holds or have your views on this changed?

**KB:** Accuracy, clarity, and naturalness are the three key concepts that are still in focus, but we've also addressed what is called "acceptability," keeping your specific audience in mind and translating with a particular audience in view. Again, I would say that's more of an addition rather than a change.

**LZ:** Like Skopos, you mean?

**KB:** Yes, exactly. In fact, there's a whole section of the book now (Part 7) which has information on that, including suggestions on how to write a translation brief, planning a translation project with a specific situation in view

**LZ:** That's great. The other thing I wondered is if you have any new insights into key terms, because I always turn to that part in your book and think about it. It's always a very hard subject.

**KB:** There is a little more on OT key terms, but not as much as I would wish there could be. There is more guidance to help people be aware of the resources that are available; there are many more online helps now. For example, Paratext's biblical terms tool, and jump links to the original texts, Hebrew or Greek, linking to lexicons and various other helps as well. There are rich resources on Logos Bible Software. I want to help people to be aware of those resources and how to access them. When it comes to the OT, though, you're the expert. I'm trying to help people be confident in what they know and also be aware of what they don't know. I always feel that I need to be aware of what I don't know—and therefore need to find out about—and where to find that needed help.

**LZ:** I'm sure it will be so helpful. In this edition, do you deal at all with orality or poetry?

**KB:** Orality certainly is a focus. Of course, focusing on orality is not a new thing. If you read Nida's early writings, he stresses orality, observing that translations are more often heard than read. I have tried to address the use of orality both in drafting translations and in checking and testing them—and also in reproducing them, sharing the Scriptures in audio form. Nowadays everybody has their cell phone and there's huge potential for sharing orally. In the process of translation and in the widespread sharing of those translations, orality is very important. I have tried to address that and to give links to other places where that issue is addressed.

**LZ:** Oh, that's great because orality really is the future, isn't it? You can't have good oral translations unless you do a written translation, I think, but even so, it's an issue that we can't get around right now in the world today.

**KB:** Yes, and I don't like to see people think of only oral translations. There may be some situations where that's appropriate, but for most projects, you need both oral production and written, because if you're going to study the Bible in depth, you have to study the written translation.

**LZ:** Yes, we do agree on that! Let's turn a little bit away from the book and talk about translation consultants and their training. In today's world, what do you think is the best way to train translation consultants? What are the profiles that we need? And how do we go about getting the people that we need?

**KB:** One very valuable source is people who have worked on translation in their own language. Experience in translating, I would say, is a very valuable asset, a learning process. And then I think of two things in particular. First, further studies including in-depth study of the biblical languages. That's something that has come much more into focus and for which there is much more potential and opportunity these days. There are excellent courses both on-site and online. In fact, I'm trying to brush up my rather scanty biblical Hebrew by doing an online course. There's huge potential for initial training and ongoing training for consultants, and consultants who haven't had exposure in their early training can get updated. So, the first is systematic training and the second is mentoring: working alongside experienced consultants, observing and then taking responsibility in consulting, while getting feedback from an experienced observer-mentor.

I think it's important to select people who are both committed and who will take this work seriously as a God-calling. We need to give trainee consultants proper support to get them through this training stage. I was concerned when someone recently shared that they felt that some consultants were dropping out because they hadn't received sufficient help, guidance, and opportunity. Those of us who are in administrative roles need to give serious attention to following

through so that those who have begun training complete that training and get into service.

**LZ:** What do you think about formal consultant training in workshops? Or one-book workshops? Ernst Wendland and I have been experimenting with the Jerusalem Center for Bible Translators (JCBT) and it seems to have a lot of potential.

**KB:** Absolutely. Both for trainee-consultants and trainee-translators, initial training must be followed up by feedback as experience builds up. One-book workshops are an excellent way to help people get into new areas: poetry, for example, starting your first translation of the Psalms. I am grateful for the excellent work that you and your team have done in that area, Lynell. We've really benefited from it. Both of the leading Mbembe translators have participated in courses at JCBT.

**LZ:** Thank you, Katy. I am thinking we're now in such a funny situation in the world with COVID and economic crises around the world. What do you think the future of Bible translation is in terms of our organisations: UBS, SIL, and others? Do you have any vision or dream or ideas on how we should move forward?

**KB:** I'm very thankful that there is much more emphasis on partnership nowadays. There's the alliance of organisations called Every Tribe, Every Nation (ETEN) and those who are seeking to promote partnership at the local level, the national level, and the international level. I think there is still a role for the different organisations, but we need to be ready to work together and to be cooperative. We need to listen to each other and to plan projects in a way that is realistic in terms of goals, but without putting time pressure on the translators, such that people are required to meet their goals at the expense of doing hasty translations that are not as good as they could be. We need to find the balance on those things.

**LZ:** Yes, I agree. Well, I think I've come to the end of my questions. Thank you for taking the time to reflect with us and answer these questions. Is there anything else you want to share with us?

**KB:** I'll share two things. One is a summary of changes in the Bible translation world to which we're adjusting and where we're seeing change:

The formation of national Bible translation organisations, national and local ownership, and involvement of local churches and communities in the translation process. That all started in the 1970s.

The availability of software and online resources designed for translation. Paratext has been a wonderful help, much appreciated and still developing.

Training now needs to include awareness of these resources and training in how to use them.

The value of partnership and teamwork, recognising different roles. Some people have more skill in exegesis, others have more skill in creative writing, creating natural and well-formed translations and translating poetry. You need to be a poet to translate poetry.

- Developing a translation brief and Skopos theory,
- Focus on oral communication,
- OT translation and progress, and
- Online training and links to online resources.

These are some of the changes that have been happening and to which we're all trying to respond in the Bible translation world.

Second, I'd like to give you just a glimpse of the online resources referred to in the textbook. As we discussed earlier, SIL hosts an accompanying website of additional resources. You can access this right now, even if you don't have the book. In the book at the end of each chapter, or most chapters, there are three headings:

- "BT4 online materials" with the names of PowerPoints and other documents you can download to supplement the information in that lesson.
- "Websites" with external links to other websites and videos. For example, there's a nice video by Dave Brunn on different kinds of translation, that you can just click on and watch.
- "For further reading" with recommended books and journal articles.

The website is experimental. We had an agreement that we'll try it for three months and then we'll review to see how it can be improved. I would like to see the site continue to be developed. There are many consultants who are much more widely read than I am, who may be able to add links for other topics. There's potential for more development.

**DM:** Now, Katy, if you're willing, I would like to read out some questions that have been sent in by attendees and BT list subscribers.

Andrew Persson writes,

Dear Katy, could you comment on the influences that shaped your original approach to the training of mother-tongue Bible translators. In what ways were you drawing on the translation theories of Eugene Nida, John Beekman, etc., and on the Firthian linguistics of that time which allowed different systems to be used for different parts of a

language analysis (rather than requiring one overall system to explain everything)?

**KB:** When I wrote the book, I was not attempting to develop a new theory of translation. What I was trying to do was to present those principles in a way that would be understood by second-language speakers who are working in their own languages. I would say that Nida's principles have held good. I find nothing that I disagree with when I read his writings. It's more extension and, as I mentioned, insights from relevance theory expressed more explicitly. The term "meaning-based" translation that I introduced was an attempt to use common language, i.e., a term that is more readily understandable. But that wasn't a change in translation principles.

**DM:** What is one thing that you wish you could have included in the book but were unable to in the end?

**KB:** In this new edition, there are more OT examples and more references to OT translation, but more could have been done. It's an attempt, but I realise it's not all that could have been done.

Another thing about this new edition is that there is much more emphasis on reference to the original biblical text. One of the reviewers queried me on referring to source texts as being English or French. Obviously, the ultimate source text is Hebrew or Greek. We have put much more emphasis on the desirability of learning Hebrew and Greek, both for translators and for consultants. In the days when I joined Wycliffe, New Testament translation was always in focus. Learning New Testament Greek was encouraged, but Hebrew was hardly mentioned. So late in life, I'm still trying to develop my scanty knowledge.

**DM:** Are there any ideas currently floating around in Bible translation, biblical studies, or translation studies that you hear, and you think, "Oh, I wish that idea would just go away?"

**KB:** Two things come to mind. One is the idea that there's a quick and dirty solution; that you can have workshops and have a translation of the Gospel of Luke out in two workshops or even one. But quick translations without thorough grounding, careful study, and application of sound translation principles are just a waste of time.

The other thing that I wish would go away is the pressure to be quick. Again, that's something that comes out of good motivation. Administrators want to keep each programme moving steadily. They want to keep people focused on doing what they should be doing, following the agreed goals—that's good. But the goals need to be reviewed and revised. Translators should not be put under so much

pressure that they can't do their best work. I would rather have a smaller amount of good translation than a larger amount of poor translation.

**DM:** What aspect of the work of a translation consultant do you still find most difficult? Where do you feel your biggest blind spot is?

**KB:** Textual issues. We've just been checking 1 Samuel and there's one reference (1 Samuel 13.1) where the commentaries observe that this is the most difficult textual issue in the whole Bible! The challenge is how to study evidence for the alternative texts and make good judgments when there is conflicting evidence, trying to make the best choice. Fortunately, there are many good resources and there are more under development, but I would say this is still a challenging area.

I'm blessed in Mbembe that I don't have to use a back translation because of having learnt the language in the past. I can still understand, though I've lost much of the ability to speak fluently, having been out of the area for many years. Getting a good back translation is very crucial in consulting.

**DM:** When I encounter a particularly knotty textual issue, I take great comfort knowing that I have at least attempted something. There was a recently released version in a language of wider communication that simply made a list of all the passages that were too difficult to translate because of textual issues and then omitted them.<sup>2</sup> I congratulate anyone who perseveres and doesn't just omit these passages. This isn't, of course, to put into question anyone's *skopos* for their translation because translation projects require tailored approaches.

**KB:** There are good reference works available. The *NIV Study Bible* has helpful footnotes on textual issues that can sometimes be usefully replicated, also NET.

**DM:** If there is anyone who is looking to teach translation principles for the very first time and they're feeling nervous or not quite up to the task, what would you say to them?

**KB:** Go in and enjoy yourself. Relate to those you're trying to train. Listen to them. Be ready to share your own experience, even your own nervousness, openly. Share your mistakes and you will find that people will respond to you and will help you. You'll begin to relax and work together with them.

Also, I would mention that there's a training manual that goes along with the textbook. It has a section on suggestions for principles to apply when teaching translation principles and training translators.

**DM:** Yes, you've certainly given a beginning translation consultant a leg up when it comes to teaching translation principles for the first time. What a gift to have

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<sup>2</sup> <https://tips.translation.bible/story/untranslatable-verses/>.



a textbook and a teacher's guide which have gone through several editions and authored by such an experienced consultant and instructor as yourself. We gratefully receive this fourth edition. For years to come, we look forward to seeing the fruit that the Holy Spirit will bring about as a result of a new generation of translators being trained—everything from Scripture portions to whole Bibles that will come about as this book finds its way into the hands of BT practitioners.

We want to thank you, Katy, for not only being a pioneer in the field of BT but helping us to pioneer new avenues of BT discussion.

**LZ:** This has been a wonderful privilege. God bless you, Katy. We love you.

**KB:** Thank you. Bless you! It's an exciting time in Bible translation. There are so many opportunities now that we never had before, so many resources, so many people involved. Now is the time to really go for it, with God's help and His guidance, to see the time when speakers of every language will have the opportunity to see—or hear—at least some Scripture in their own language. Bless you all.

# When Words Are Rolled into a Ball

## Translating Figurative Language in Africa

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**Abstract:** This article examines differences between direct and indirect communication styles and describes the results of applying translation theory developed under the assumptions of the direct communication style. It discusses the role of metaphor, poetry, and proverbs in Africa, and explores the question of how indirect communication should be represented in translation.<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Introduction

Within the Bible translation movement, translators have been taught to strive for clarity, accuracy, naturalness, and acceptability (Barnwell 2020:29–30). What is meant by “clarity,” however, is (ironically!) not always clear. Does it mean not introducing ambiguities and meaningless expressions, and avoiding language that leads the reader toward meanings not derivable from the source text? Or does it mean spelling out all source text meaning explicitly with the goal of making it comprehensible without effort? In practice, the latter definition tends to prevail.

Over the last few decades, Bible translators have begun to realize that the code model of communication as applied to translation—decode the source language (SL) text and re-encode using receptor language (RL) lexicon and grammar—has numerous inadequacies.<sup>2</sup> Several helpful books and videos have become available that explore how to apply more accurate models of cognition and communication to translation (see for example Gutt 1992, Wilt 2002,

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to David Weber for extensive comments on this paper, and to Richard Chiabuotu, Daniel Gya, Jennifer Harper, Idris Tahiru, Robin Watson, and an anonymous reviewer for their input as well. Any errors, of course, remain my own.

<sup>2</sup> See Weber 2005 for a concise description of the code model and some of its pitfalls as applied to translation.

Wendland 2004 and 2013, Wendland and Wilt 2008, Hill et al. 2011, Pattermore 2013a and 2013b). But on the ground, a great deal of time is still spent in teaching translators to make adjustments to certain classes of linguistic phenomena: changing metaphors to similes (or simply expressing the “point of similarity” by non-figurative language), filling in ellipses, replacing metonymy and synecdoche with direct referents, eliminating repetition, and so forth. A frequent assumption among translation consultants and in resource materials for translators is that such adjustments should be made, with little attention given to the implications in the RL. In this paper I examine some of those implications, consider the differences between a communication style valuing explicitness (which is often given a great deal of emphasis due to the number of consultants and trainers coming from societies where this approach is assumed to be normal) versus indirect communication styles I have encountered in Africa,<sup>3</sup> and explore how these affect translation.

## 2 The “make things clear” communication style

Consultants and resource materials for translators tend to put pressure on translators to be as explicit as possible. A typical example is the *UBS Translator's Handbook* entry for Psalm 76:1–3 (2–4 in Hebrew). Literally the Hebrew text says something like this:

God is known in Judah;  
In Israel his name is great.  
His dwelling is in Salem,  
His abode in Zion.  
There he shattered the flames of the bow,  
Shield and sword and war.

TEV renders the last two lines: “There he broke the arrows of the enemy, their shields and swords, yes, all their weapons.”

The *Handbook* entry categorically states, “A translation should make clear, as TEV does, that it was the weapons of the enemy that God broke; otherwise, it may appear that God was destroying his own weapons” (Bratcher and Reyerburn 1991:665). That issue would make a good testing question. But notice how the *Handbook* authors make the a priori assumption that “enemy” must be made

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<sup>3</sup> Obviously there are multitudes of diverse societies within Africa. Nevertheless, in my work as a translation consultant with various African languages across language families, I have noticed themes and tendencies which are recurrent enough to suggest that there is a pattern wider than just the language communities with whom I have personally interacted.

explicit. Whether or not this is necessary in the RL—or whether such an addition might in fact be wordily unpoetic in the RL—is not even considered.

Or take the *Handbook* entry on Jeremiah 9:8: “‘Their tongue is a deadly arrow’ is obviously a comparison equivalent to ‘Their tongues are like deadly arrows’ (TEV). GECL is even better: ‘Their words are like deadly arrows’” (Newman and Stine 2003:256). Note the assumption: Simile is better than metaphor, and eliminating figures of speech (in this case, metonymy) is better yet. It is presented as an across-the-board principle independent of RL structures and communication styles.

Through the years, a large percentage of Bible translation consultants and writers of training materials and translation helps have come from societies where explicitness tends to be a high value. Thus, the push to de-metaphorize, fill in implicit information, and “make things clear” is sensible. In many parts of the Western world, figurative language tends to be avoided and poetry does not have the status that it has in some societies (particularly societies whose verbal art forms are primarily oral).

In the United States it is a handicap for a candidate for high office to be known as a writer of poetry. It gives the impression that he is not enough a man of action to be a political leader... [M]odern European and American cultures give a much less significant position to poetry than it held in the world of the Old Testament. (Crim 1972)

Storti’s “Degree of Directness” continuum (2017:98), on which the US rates as very direct and Africa as very indirect, has this note about societies with direct communication styles: “People say what they mean and mean what they say; there is no need to read between the lines;...people are less likely to imply and more likely to say exactly what they are thinking...” (2017:97). Within such a cultural system, it is natural to believe that spelling things out in plain language is superior to relying on something as “vague” as implicature or metaphor. Where poetry is thought inappropriate for serious discussion and indirect communication is considered “beating around the bush,” the obvious conclusion for translation is that figurative language is risky and that clearer—defined as “more explicit”—is better.

Whether or not these communication standards, even in societies preferring directness, are grounded in a realistic understanding of cognition is a matter of debate. For example, Wilson and Sperber say:

The very idea that what a speaker says should always (with the possible exception of poetry) be either literal or paraphrasable by means of a literal utterance is an illusion of folk linguistics. Western folk linguistics, at least, is committed to a code model of communication from which it follows that what is said should always be transparent

or paraphrasable. Efforts to bring communicative practice into line with this ideal have had some effect on language use. (2012:82-83)

But regardless of how accurate the model is, the fact remains that the ideal of direct communication has entailed teaching translators to be wary of figurative language and to translate as explicitly as is reasonably possible. They are urged to fill in ellipses and eliminate repetition, and they are trained to convert figurative to non-figurative language.

### 3 The “roll it into a ball” communication style

A communicative tradition favoring “plain language” differs sharply from the metaphor-swaddled, provocative, implication-rich, poetically delivered communication found in large sections of the OT. Further—as many a Western expatriate has found—it clashes with African communication styles.

One phrase I often hear in Fulfulde is *Ka tamiika* ‘that talk is rolled into a ball’. It means that the meaning of the message is far beyond what is explicitly encoded.

About societies with indirect communication styles—and Africa is far on the indirect end of Storti’s continuum—Storti comments that “you have to read between the lines; people are more likely to suggest or imply than to come out and say what they think” (2017:97). What that of course means is that people used to indirect communication styles assume a message to mean more than is explicitly encoded, and as soon as they hear it they set to working out the full gamut of implicatures. This has unfortunate consequences for the understanding of a translation done under the make-it-all-explicit model!

#### 3.1 Usage of metaphor in Africa

In African languages, metaphor is lavishly used (see for example Yankah 1991, Obeng 1997:56ff, Diagne 2005, Batoma 2009, and Schoeffel 2015:65). An Igbo friend in Nigeria told me that an Igbo “says nothing without beginning or ending his/her speech with a proverb or riddle” and that a proverb is called “the palm oil with which words are eaten.”<sup>4</sup> A man from Niger once told me that saying something in simple and obvious language is “for children.” An elder, a person of status, is supposed to do better than that. Being able to encode something so the hearer has to think about it to figure it out is a highly valued skill. Being able to decode is also a highly valued skill. There is an Igbo saying, “The man who needs a proverb explained to him—his mother’s bride price was a waste.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Chiabuotu, p.c.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Particularly if the subject matter is important, obvious and clear language is avoided. This is opposite from the norm I grew up with in the US, where the more important the subject matter is, the more precise and clear the language. Such a difference in approach caused friction between a Malian friend of mine and his American colleague. One day the Malian finally demanded, “Why do you always treat me like a child?” The point of offense was that the American, whenever there was any matter of importance to be discussed, would spell everything out crystal clear. The Malian had put up with this for years, but constantly smarted from the disgrace and disrespect of it (as he perceived it). He was an adult and fully capable of working out meaning from indirect clues!

Daily conversation in Africa abounds with metaphors. Some are frozen; for example, a letter I received recently included a wish common in Nigerian English: “More grease to your elbow.” Others occur as proverbs; someone commenting on a death in the village where I live quoted the Hausa proverb, *Mutuwa rigar kowa ce* ‘death is everybody’s garment’. Often, however, they are live metaphors invented on the spot. I heard the principal of a Nigerian Bible institute comment in regard to obtaining faculty, “PhDs are very heavy people. The ground of this place is too soft for them” (meaning that the school cannot afford to pay the salary of a PhD holder).

Recently I was talking with some Fulfulde-speaking friends in Nigeria and one of them said, about someone not present, *Umaru wartii duluuru* ‘Umaru has become a whirlwind’. He of course did not mean that Umaru is literally a whirlwind, but rather that he is dangerous, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and has supernatural powers. According to the model of communication assumed by traditional translation theories,<sup>6</sup> the only way a listener can arrive at the correct meaning is to first check the literal meaning, reject it as unacceptable, and begin hunting for other possibilities. Yet listeners instantaneously process metaphors all the time, and psycholinguistic experiments (even with Westerners) have demonstrated that it does not necessarily take longer to process non-literal language than literal language (Gibbs 1994:109–110ff, 2002).

Why did my friend not simply say, “Umaru is dangerous. He is uncontrollable and unpredictable, and he has supernatural powers?” It is because he could say it much more briefly and dramatically by using a metaphor—and he knew he could trust us to figure out which characteristics of a *duluuru* applied to Umaru (e.g., unpredictability, association with bush spirits) and which did not (e.g., inanimacy, dustiness). The ideas of being dangerous, unpredictable, uncontrollable and in touch with spiritual powers are indirectly communicated—evoked rather than forced on the listener. The immediate

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<sup>6</sup> See Gibbs 1994, chapter 3, for an overview of what he terms the “standard pragmatic model.”

communication context may select or highlight certain ideas more than others, but even ideas that are suggested very strongly are evoked, not stated: we could not quite nail down my friend as having asserted that Umaru has supernatural powers—after all, he never actually came out and said so. There is a cloud of impressions (in the language of relevance theory, an array of weak implicatures), and we are given an idea of the sort of person Umaru is, but the statement only encourages—does not compel—the listeners to draw certain conclusions. Saying *Umaru e woodi bawde ginni* ‘Umaru has power from spirits’ would insist on the listeners concluding that my friend believes Umaru has secret powers. *Umaru wartii duluuru* only encourages them to think so. Thus, when translators drop a metaphor in favor of explication, they are likely to misrepresent the strength with which the information was intended to be communicated—a hint becomes a strong assertion.

Sometimes it is claimed that metaphor is just a formal device which has a basic “point of similarity” with the topic, and this point of similarity can be expressed in non-figurative language; therefore, if translators think the metaphor will not be readily understood, they should remove the metaphor and simply spell out the point of comparison. The problem is that metaphors are not merely ornamental; they are vital for expressing certain ranges of meaning. A metaphor may be the only way in which the communicator can evoke all the connotations, impressions, emotions, and indirect implications (implicatures) that they intend. There is not just one point of similarity that can be expressed equally well in non-figurative language. So converting a metaphor to plain language involves loss of information. The vast shimmering array of associations is sheared off, sparing just one which the translator has judged to be the most appropriate.<sup>7</sup>

At a presentation I once gave on these issues, a translation consultant who was present objected, asserting that actually within a given context, every metaphor has only one point of similarity, and to claim more than that is an exegetical fallacy. While it may be true that many a far-fetched sermon has been preached by someone who imagined that every single characteristic of the image could be mapped onto the topic, the one-point-of-similarity view of metaphor is overly simplistic. As Barnwell warns, “It is not always best to make the point of similarity explicit. Sometimes making the point explicit would lessen its impact. It may also limit the meaning—often there are several points of similarity and to make only one explicit would communicate only part of the total meaning” (2020:224).

Nida observes:

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<sup>7</sup> See Gutt 1992, particularly chapter 4, for an in-depth treatment of these issues.

In a sense figurative language is mind-expanding, for it stimulates a reader to see a wealth of different possible meanings and implications. In Psalm 102.11 the psalmist could have simply said “I will soon die,” but how much more effective is the statement “My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.” The phrase “an evening shadow” is not only less distinct than a daytime shadow, but it is bound to soon disappear. And the figure of “withering grass” not only suggests the intense heat of conflict and hostility, but the complete lack of resources to withstand these trials. (1982:437)

Obviously much of this discussion is relevant even in societies preferring direct communication, and has in fact, been treated extensively in the relevance theory literature. I grew up in the United States and can attest to the fact that Americans use imagery too. However, in societies where indirect communication is normal and metaphor is the lifeblood of serious discussion, a translation done according to plain-language values can actually discourage reader attention because it seems childishly simple, or can, on the other hand encourage over-interpretation—because surely the authors were not so childish as to spell out what they meant to communicate!<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2 Poetry in Africa

A few years ago I was talking with two translators from a Mande language in Mali, one of whom is well-versed in Arabic literature, both pre- and post-Islamic. He is passionate about poetry—the rich written tradition of Arabic and the oral poetry of his own language. He mentioned that the main characteristics of Arabic poetry are rhyme, meter, and imagery. “Imagery is crucial,” he commented, “because that’s what poetry IS. That is what challenges the listeners and makes them think about the meaning. It’s true in Arabic and it’s true in our language. If you were to take away the image and just say the thing straight out, it wouldn’t be worth the listeners’ time to even bother listening. But by imagery you can say a thing powerfully and get the listeners to wrestle with your claims. Without imagery, why should they even take notice of what you are saying?”

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<sup>8</sup> This issue can of course be tricky in multilingual urban contexts. Who is the intended audience? If it is people in their twenties, can they handle the verbal art forms, proverbs, metaphors, ideophones, etc., of their mother tongue, or are these being eroded by the influence of other languages? Note that losing traditional imagery does *not* mean that young urban Africans avoid imagery; new imagery is being generated thick and fast (see Kiessling and Mous 2004, especially pp. 22–24). But before and during a translation project, awareness of the actual linguistic practices of the intended audience (not the practices from thirty years ago!) is necessary in order to communicate appropriately.



“Yes,” chimed in the other translator (who does not know Arabic but is a poet in his mother tongue). “You can say, for example, ‘So-and-so is a lion.’ And it is not even the same to say, ‘So-and-so is like a lion.’ To say it powerfully, to say it poetically, you simply use the image to represent the person.”

“Now of course that’s not the case in Western languages,” commented the first translator. “In Western languages, people are expected to speak in concrete terms and not by metaphors.”

I found their comments interesting not only because of the prime importance of imagery in their minds and their conception of metaphor as very different from simile, but also their impression that imagery is avoided in the West. Obviously, they were overstating the case—there are plenty of examples of imagery in Western poetry—but traditionally its defining features have been intricate sound patterns rather than semantic substitutions.

In Fulfulde, traditional oral poetry uses one metaphor after another, never explaining or unwrapping, but piling one image on top of another and another; or taking a single metaphor and developing it line after line. A traditional wedding song includes the following line:

*Dam            joodoo,       to’           dam       lalla.*

CM.liquid    stay           not       CM.liquid spoil

‘May the liquid stay, may it not spoil.’

The “plain language” meaning behind this metaphor is a wish that the marriage be filled with joy and prosperity (the liquid class marker *dam* is a reference to milk, evidence of a fertile herd) and avoid both poverty and divorce. However, this proposition is never stated explicitly anywhere in the song. This is typical of Fulfulde poetry: line after line of riddles, left for the listener to solve.

Admittedly, such metaphors may sound more like riddles to me as a second-language speaker than to mother-tongue speakers. Any metaphor that is part of the shared knowledge of a language community, such as the milk motif in wedding songs, may have been a riddle when it was first invented, but it was solved long ago. Nonetheless it is clear that there is a preference for expressing important ideas by metaphor—even if the metaphors are familiar—rather than as explicit propositions. Further, there is a robust tendency to invent new metaphors. Speakers of Fulfulde often coin metaphors that hearers appear to process instantly and effortlessly, and they also coin enigmatic metaphors that make the hearers glance at each other, trying to work out the meaning without requesting an explanation, and then to come up with a similarly indirect response. The preference for metaphors—whether solved or to-be-solved—is a part of the RL communication situation that we need to engage with.

### 3.3 Proverbs in Africa

Much has been written about the rich corpus of proverbs in African societies, including some insightful work on translation applications in this genre (see for example Schneider 1992, Salisbury 1994, Wendland 2013:131–159). Here I want to focus on one language community's perceptions of the defining characteristics of a proverb and its communicative functions.

Before we translated the book of Proverbs into Fulfulde, the translators and I collected scores of traditional proverbs and discussed what makes a proverb a proverb in their language. They defined the principal characteristics of traditional proverbs as (1) a metaphorical or analogical base, (2) a teaching or observation about life and (3) a wide range of applications. We will consider each of these in turn.

*Metaphorical base.* According to my Fulfulde-speaking colleagues, the primary component of a proverb (*banndol*) is its metaphorical character. What makes it a proverb is that it expresses concepts using an image or roundabout expression that forces the hearer to ponder what hidden meanings were intended. In fact, any metaphor is referred to as a *banndol* because of the word picture that cloaks a meaning. Short, terse statements even to the point of allowing non-canonical grammar are favored. However, terse sayings that an English speaker would classify as “proverbs” are not classed as *banndi* if they are not metaphor-based; for example, *Jonnde meere waddii kuugal meere*—literally ‘Worthless sitting brought worthless work’—that is, idleness engenders bad behavior. Such sayings are instead classed as *ekkitinol* ‘teaching’ or *vagginoore* ‘warning’.<sup>9</sup>

*Teaching about life.* Fulfulde proverbs aim to teach, to encourage or discourage certain kinds of behavior, or to make an observation about some facet of life. However, the instruction is extremely compact. “A proverb is a teaching, not an explanation,” one speaker told me. The use of metaphor creates a spring-loaded teaching that “zaps” the hearer with great impact by an extreme economy of words pointing to a vast array of implicatures that the hearers retrieve for themselves. It is short and sharp, and in its pithiness lies its power.<sup>10</sup>

*Wide range of applications.* Proverbs are general enough to have a wide range of applications. One of the translators told me that in Fulfulde, “if it is a proverb, the saying is rolled up into a ball; and if you unroll it, the meaning is very wide.”

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<sup>9</sup> In English, proverbs may be metaphor-based (e.g., “It never rains but it pours”) or non-metaphor-based (e.g., “Out of sight, out of mind”). Thus the defining characteristic in English is not metaphor.

<sup>10</sup> This may be true in non-African languages as well. See Schneider (1998:26–28) on the translation of Hebrew proverbs.



irritating, itchy fuzz. In some contexts, the meaning of this proverb is “A fine man had a nasty son.” So, do you base your translation on that meaning? If you do, it does not apply to the situation of a good teacher turning out bad students—but speakers do use the original proverb for describing that situation as well. Fulfulde proverbs are very broad in scope.

Some proverbs lend themselves a little more to non-figurative generalization; for example, it would probably be possible to cover most or all usages of (2), *Hesi fuu e pemmbol boddum*, by saying, “Someone or something new may seem wonderful at first, but in the end be no better than what you had before.” This may be true, it may be insightful, but it is not memorable. The genius of Africa’s oral wisdom literature is in vivid snapshots that make a teaching unforgettable.

## 4 In translation, whose communication style do we apply?

### 4.1 Pick one application and translate that...or not?

Ecclesiastes 11:1 contains this terse proverb: “Send your bread on the surface of the waters, for after many days you will find it.” In Arabic literature there is a similar saying that seems to be talking about the results of generosity, and the traditional Jewish interpretation is also that this verse is talking about generosity (Ogden and Zogbo 1997:392). However, some commentators think it refers to foreign trade, and others take it to be about making investments. Egyptian literature contains a similar saying that seems to refer more generally to good deeds (Walton 2009:513).

So, which does this verse mean? Well, who says it has to mean only one of them? Like Fulfulde proverbs, it could be applicable to a wide array of situations, with the meaning varying according to the situation.

After long discussion about how to translate it, one team in Nigeria decided to translate the metaphor as a metaphor, leaving the reader to explore the array of possible interpretations. But this is what the consultant report said about the rendering:

This literal translation is meaningless, and this cannot be justified with reference to the difficulty in interpreting the original (contra HBK<sup>11</sup>). The team must choose between the various interpretations discussed in HBK: generosity (which seems to me convincing), foreign trade, investment, etc.

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<sup>11</sup> UBS Translator’s Handbook.

This necessitated another lengthy team discussion. The mother-tongue translators were opposed to choosing only one interpretation. One of them said, “If we just pick one meaning, we have cut off all the other possibilities. This is a proverb with a very broad application. You can apply it to sharing with others. You can apply it to planting your maize instead of eating it up right now. You can apply it to international commerce. But if we just pick one application and translate that, then we have no more proverb and only one narrow statement.”

A further problem with de-metaphorizing was cultural. Saying things in a roundabout, cloaked, imperspicuous way is highly valued in their society. People do not just make plain statements if there is any possible way to make a riddle of the statement so that the listener will have to think carefully to figure out what is meant. The wiser one is, the more one is expected to speak in enigmas; and the more didactic/hortatory the discourse is, the more metaphor one employs. In fact, a survey of natural texts revealed that in narrative, the use of imagery is somewhat economical, but as soon as the moral or some sort of evaluation is reached, the metaphors come crowding thick and fast. To substitute plain language for the figure would remove the impact and in fact make the statement not worth pondering.

The first consultant’s comments were discussed with another consultant, and the second consultant’s reaction was, “No, no, NO! When will consultants stop pressuring people to kill the power of the text?” This question is particularly crucial in societies where important information is commonly communicated by metaphors and proverbs. Sitting in business meetings conducted in Fulfulde, I have been struck by what a huge amount of the discussion consists of metaphors, one after another. We have to be careful in our translations that we do not trivialize Scripture’s message by presenting it simplistically.

## 4.2 Using RL metaphors

I want to be clear that I am not saying the answer is to translate literally. As Beekman and Callow’s classic work (1974) demonstrated, there are plenty of cases in which a SL metaphor is meaningless or carries wrong meaning in the RL. But we should be slow to simply discard figurative language, especially in societies where people expect that any speaker worth taking seriously will word a message in a way that has to be grappled with. We should actively search for ways to use the figurative language available in the RL to convey the meaning of the text. If we believe that Scripture is God’s message—and most people in the Bible translation movement do—we should put the RL’s best into translating it. There will be places where, if we are to avoid miscommunication, we may have to use non-figurative language. We should, however, try hard to find appropriate RL figures to convey the meaning of the SL figures, and in some texts in which

the SL actually uses non-figurative language, it may be more appropriate in an African language to use a figure.<sup>12</sup>

In Fulfulde, an example of rendering an SL metaphor by a (different) RL one is in 2 Samuel 11:25, where King David says, “Like this one and like this one the sword eats”—in plain language, “Being killed in war can happen to anyone.” This plain-language rendering is followed in several meaning-based English translations.

A literal rendition of this metaphor in Fulfulde would have communicated little or nothing to the hearer. Swords just do not eat in Fulfulde. However, by analogy to a common saying, *Mayde walaa esiraawo* ‘death has no in-law’, we put *Kaafahi walaa esiraawo* ‘the sword has no in-law’. The intent of this statement is of course not that a sword has no in-laws (that is certainly true, but hardly relevant). The personification of the sword as having no in-laws and therefore no-one that it must be careful to respect/avoid is interpreted accurately by Fulfulde-speakers because of a vast cloud of cultural knowledge and associations with the similar proverb that is often quoted when death is discussed. When the Fulfulde metaphor is substituted for the Hebrew metaphor, not only does the correct meaning come through, but it also sounds much better for King David to say it this way instead of in flat, plain language. A person of his status is expected to be creative and speak well, not just blurt out the unadorned and obvious.

Another example is Proverbs 4:16. The second line, speaking of evildoers, says literally, “their sleep is plundered unless they make someone fall.” Sleep can be “plundered” in Hebrew and “robbed of sleep” works in English, but not in Fulfulde. The UBS Handbook states, “In languages where ‘rob’ or ‘steal’ are not used in this way, it will be necessary to use an expression of the meaning in plain terms; for example, ‘They are unable to sleep unless they have made...’” (Reyburn and Fry 2000:107). But will it actually be “necessary?” Before settling for something colorless, we should at least look for something vivid. In this case, when we looked for metaphors associated with sleeplessness, we ended up with the rendering “their eyes dry out *rayaw* [ideophone] unless they make someone fall.” This has a vividness that is far beyond that of a plain-language rendering.

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<sup>12</sup> My colleague Richard Chiabuotu pointed out that in the Nigerian languages he speaks, emotionally charged topics like death or freedom are discussed in figurative language, because non-figurative language “feels too feeble to hold the weight.” Thus it is important for a translator to be aware, in a given RL, which topics are normally handled with figurative language.

### 4.3 A proposal: ease up on the direct communication campaign

I believe that as translators, project advisers, consultants, and trainers we should develop a healthy caution about de-metaphorizing. Yes, we should communicate the meaning of the original. But we should not do so in a way that sounds cheap or childish. Yes, it is often necessary to explicate. But our eagerness to do so should be tempered by the realization that explication can actually distort the meaning of the original text. Here are two principles I believe we should bear in mind as we translate, consult, mentor, and teach: (1) avoid imposing a single interpretation on an open-ended text, and (2) look for ways to utilize the riches of the RL.

#### 4.3.1 *Keep in mind that explication imposes limitations on the message*

When Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” or “Don’t cast your pearls before swine,” did he intend to convey a proposition that could be instantaneously converted to a single non-figurative meaning in the hearers’ minds, or did he intend to provoke them to ponder and explore the many implications and applications of those statements? Advocates of the single-point-of-similarity view will have a hard time coming up with the one-and-only way in which Jesus is like light, since light in the Jewish context represented life as opposed to death, prosperity (Omanson and Noss 1997:210), joy (Fishbane 2002:305, Sarna 1989:7), safety (Walton 2009:293), divine favor and blessing (Bratcher and Rebyburn 1991:46, 843), justice and deliverance (Sarna 1989:7), God’s side as opposed to Satan’s (Harrison and Abegg 2009:70), provider of insight (OT wisdom literature—note in particular Psalm 119:130 and Proverbs 6:23), and so on.

A speaker using a very direct communication style frames his message so as to leave the hearer only a narrow range of available inferences; this results in a very precise meaning being conveyed. In indirect communication, the speaker frames his message so as to allow the hearer a great deal of latitude in making inferences, resulting in a cloud of associations or several possible interpretations.<sup>13</sup> As one translation consultant has pointed out (Weber 2005:58), this latter approach is the one Jesus took most of the time. He made people

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<sup>13</sup> In relevance theory, such direct communication is referred to as “strong implicature(s)” (because the speaker explicitly asserts his propositions) and indirect communication is referred to as “weak implicature(s)” (because the speaker evokes rather than asserting). See, for example, Sperber and Wilson (1995:199–200, 221–237). Note that “weak” does *not* mean lacking force or impact! Communication involving weak implicatures is often far more loaded, far more forceful, than communication involving strong implicatures. This is true even in English, as the relevance theory literature demonstrates in great detail.

stretch to understand. He invited them to think about who he really was, but he often opted not to say it straight out. He did not coerce the hearers; he made provocative statements and asked leading questions to help them infer the answers. It may be tempting to translate the Gospels by putting Jesus' words in simple, clear, precise terms, but this can actually distort the historical facts and undermine his communication strategy. Philosopher Dallas Willard highlights the didactic power of Jesus' approach, observing that Jesus' use of logic

is always enthymemic [leaving at least one premise unstated], as is common to ordinary life and conversation. His points are, with respect to logical explicitness, understated and underdeveloped. The significance of the enthymeme is that it enlists the mind of the hearer or hearers from the inside, in a way that full and explicit statement of argument cannot do. Its rhetorical force is, accordingly, quite different from that of fully explicated argumentation, which tends to distance the hearer from the force of logic by locating it outside of his own mind. Jesus's aim [is] to achieve understanding or insight in his hearers. This understanding only comes from the inside... It seems to 'well up from within' one. Thus he does not follow the logical method one often sees in Plato's dialogues, or the method that characterizes most teaching and writing today. That is, he does not try to make everything so explicit that the conclusion is forced down the throat of the hearer. Rather, he presents matters in such a way that those who wish to know can find their way to, can come to, the appropriate conclusion as something they have discovered—whether or not it is something they particularly care for. (2011:124–125)

Large sections of Scripture take this indirect approach to communication and altering the communication style should not be done lightly. As Schneider points out:

Certaines ambiguïtés voulues—notamment par l'usage du langage figuratif—doivent parfois être respectées, par exemple dans la traduction des proverbes, car de telles 'obscurités' maintiennent la porte ouverte à une pluralité de lectures et d'applications valables, ce qui est le propre du style gnomique.<sup>14</sup> (1998:27)

Wendland is more emphatic, pointing out that meaning-based translations all too often

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<sup>14</sup> "Certain desirable ambiguities—particularly by the use of figurative language—should sometimes be respected, for example in the translation of proverbs, because such 'obscurity' keeps the door open to multiple understandings and valuable applications, which is characteristic of wisdom literature."



fail to do justice to the Proverbs and sapiential discourse in general by clumsily applying conventional restructuring techniques such as disambiguation, coupled with frequent syntactic transformation or semantic generalization in the over-zealous defense of semantic clarity and readability. To be sure, the resultant text turns out to be very understandable—almost too easy at times. In addition, all too often certain crucial aspects of a distinctive proverbial nature get washed out in the simplification process—not only the seasoned, memorable style, but also the power of a proverb to stimulate further reflection, deeper meditation, a search for some solution, or a new perspective on things. (2013:158)

This indirect approach that pulls the audience into unpacking a tightly-wrapped ball of meaning is in fact “a defining characteristic of poetry” (Weber 2005:56). Sperber and Wilson (2012:118) define “poetic effects” as “cognitive effects achieved by conveying...a wide range of weak implicatures.” This does not mean we should avoid rendering strong implicatures present in the SL text. It means we should recognize that emotion, memorability and impact often are tied up with weak-implicature-exuding figures of speech. Literary art requires imagery, because “it is the range and the indeterminacy of the implicatures which gives the metaphor its poetic force” (Pilkington 2000:102). This is true even of languages spoken in societies toward the direct communication end of the continuum. How much more is this an issue when translating into languages spoken by people who value indirect communication, as is true in many parts of Africa! We should strive to keep indirect communication as indirect communication. We should be especially careful in approaching poetic passages. It may be tempting to simply “discover the meaning” and re-render the text in plain language, but this destroys the poetry. Certainly, one can translate just the meaning, overhauling metaphors as non-figurative language and filling in all the implied words that the writer trimmed out of the grammar as he crafted his observation into poetry instead of prose. But what emerges is flat and dull—so different from the sparkling original! What gives poetry its special luster is the stating of a truth in a strange new way, one that makes the hearer think, one whose meaning is swaddled in an unusual wrap and needs the hearer to unwrap it to find it. If we merely provide an explanation, it is prose, not poetry—and probably not very good prose at that. A Nigerian friend once told me that one can gauge how “serious” a message is by whether the delivery is “serious”—by which he meant delivered via metaphors and proverbs. This should give us pause in how we translate what we believe to be the most serious message of all time!

### 4.3.2 *Look for ways to utilize the riches of the language*

The gold-mine of idioms, ideophones, and colorful expressions available in African languages should be accessed to communicate the message of Scripture with the power and beauty it deserves. The Hebrew Psalms and prophets showcase incredible care and skill and literary virtuosity. We may be less talented, but at least we should aim to do them as much justice as possible.

Sometimes, as my colleagues on the Fulfulde translation team are in the throes of trying to express some Hebrew term in their language, I have heard them say things like, “We don’t have an expression like that.” “We can’t say that.” “We don’t have any synonyms for this,” and so forth. On the spot, it is sometimes difficult even for a mother-tongue speaker to come up with a really good equivalent. One thing I have found very helpful is creating a list of semantic domains, constantly updated as I hear people conversing. (Another useful data source is the RL text corpus of songs, stories, sermons, debates, etc., collected for discourse analysis.) The list includes all sorts of conceptual domains: anger, beauty, lying, skinniness, and so on and so forth. Any term I hear, metaphorical or non-metaphorical, goes under the appropriate domain. So, when a translator says, “We don’t have a way to say that he was angry other than ‘he was angry,’” a quick look at the list offers twenty-nine other possibilities.

A list of ideophones is also highly valuable. The intensification patterns typical in Hebrew poetry are not always easy to recreate. Most African languages have a wealth of ideophones, and sometimes an ideophone offers just the vivid intensification needed.

Ellipses should be handled carefully. Implicit information that perhaps should be supplied in narrative may militate against elegance in poetic texts, even to the point of stunting the impact of the passage.<sup>15</sup> We need to study RL poetry and proverbs, noticing what types of ellipsis are used and what types avoided (Is there verbal ellipsis? Ellipsis of subjects? Objects? Ellipsis of larger units?) and how else speech is pared down to the vital essence. The results of these observations should then be reflected in our translation of such genres.

Let’s rein in the automatic reflex to convert metaphors to similes, and instead seriously consider which is best in each case, based on RL norms. Although metaphors and similes are blithely equated in some translation

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<sup>15</sup> As Wendland observes, “While the operation of implicit => explicit tends to be more common, it may also be necessary for certain material that was explicit in the biblical text to be implicit in the TL, for example, redundant information that would make the translation sound unnatural or even obscure due to all the detail. This is especially true in poetic discourse, in which brevity of expression often produces greater impact” (2004:231n).

manuals,<sup>16</sup> actual research not only backs up the Malian who said the real power is in a metaphor, but also shows that at least in some cases, the hearer's interpretation of a metaphor is not the same as the interpretation of the corresponding simile—the meaning is actually different (Glucksberg and Haught 2006).

Obviously, it is crucial to render metaphors in a way that communicates the correct meaning. And obviously there are many metaphors that do not transfer between languages. However, systematic de-metaphorizing produces very flat texts, stripped of power and vividness. The SL metaphors are eliminated and few or no RL ones are introduced. Training programs should drill translators not in converting figures of speech to non-figurative language, but in finding appropriate RL figures of speech to convey the source text meaning. Do they in fact know how to research their language's verbal art forms, and is time budgeted into their translation schedule to allow this? The expertise of local poets and storytellers should be sought. As always, testing of a proposed rendering is necessary to make sure that the translation is communicating the correct meaning.

As a voice from the literary translation world observes, "Art must be rendered as art, otherwise it is no longer art" (Hofstadter 1997:557). Even in English, readers have noted that although TEV does well in being clear, it is rather a flop in poetry. One commented that Moses' song in Exodus 15 loses the majesty of poetry and comes out sounding like prose—in fact "like the newspaper" (Gardner 1991:21). In a society that places relatively small value on poetry and rhetoric, this is perhaps not so serious (though it does give the wrong impression of the Bible's literary quality). But in an oral society, where subtle and poetic communication is a highly developed art and expected of those who are wise, such an approach to Scripture translation sabotages the importance and preciousness of the message.

## 5 In conclusion—some questions

A cultural preference for plain language as opposed to figurative speech has exerted significant influence on the Bible translation movement. But is it not time to re-think it—particularly in those parts of the world where the stuff of deep thought, the essence of wisdom, the teachings of parents, and the debates of chiefs are one vast torrent of imagery? If, as my African friends tell me, making a claim in simple and obvious language is "for children," are we trivializing the

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Larson (1998:271) says, "Metaphors do not have the word *like* or *as*, but they are also comparisons that can often be rewritten as similes...[Examples of some metaphors.] Notice that these could just as well be said as similes."

message by forcing the text to be more explicit than it originally was—simply because our translation model tells us that simple and obvious is superior? Are we making the patronizing assumption that Africans will not be able to process metaphors properly? Are we eliminating what the RL audience recognizes as poetry—imagery—and producing a sort of gloss of the original that is no longer a poem? And if so, is that really translation?

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# Key Terms of the Old Testament

## 5th Release Announcement

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The Key Terms of the Old Testament (KTOT) project has scheduled its fifth release for early November 2021. We hope to bring the number of articles to about seventy-five. Most of those articles are based on Hebrew words, but about 10 percent are topical articles. Many of the terms share cultural background or are part of a larger semantic field. So, we have encouraged our contributors to write articles that bring together the semantic field, like sacrifice terms or forbidden practices, where the terms need to be compared and contrasted. In other cases, words evoke cultural values, like patronage, that may not be evident to those coming from many of our societies.

We have a diverse team of contributors including various nationalities and representing several different organizations, among them, the Seed Company, the Word for the World, SIL, Dallas International University, and national Bible translation organizations.

### What is KTOT?

KTOT is a tool for Old Testament translators. It differs from many OT lexical tools by having a foundation in cognitive linguistics, informed by relevance theory. It places a strong emphasis on providing the cultural background that many of these important Old Testament terms would have evoked for the original hearers and tries to access the network of meaning that they might have conveyed.

KTOT differs from Hebrew lexicons by providing a definition of the term rather than a simple listing of possible meanings. Following the definition is a list of contextual uses, some of which may be associative or comparative extensions of meaning. Our KTOT contributors then provide a more detailed discussion of the definition, any grammatical issues that need to be considered, words with similar meaning from which it may need to be distinguished, cultural background, etc. including sections on the history of how the word has been translated in languages like Greek and Latin, and recommendations about how a translator may want to approach translating the term.



KTOT differs from theological dictionaries in that it begins with a focus on the common use(s) of a term. Theology is important but KTOT assumes that the theological use of the term develops out of its common use. Often, the better we understand the common use, the better we will understand the theological use. If we reverse that and start with the theological use of the term, it may tell us little about the common use.

### Example: גֹּאֵל

A good example of this is גֹּאֵל (G'L), a term that I worked on with Jason Sommerlad. גֹּאֵל (G'L), is usually translated into English as “to redeem.” The participle, גֹּאֵל (go'el), is then translated as “redeemer,” “kinsman,” “avenger,” or “nearest kinsman,” depending on context.

The connection between these various translations of the term is obscure to people not familiar with the biblical contexts. But a close examination of passages where the term is used of humans shows that it refers to a male family member who has the right and the responsibility to maintain the stability and viability of the family. Among the rights would be the right of inheritance, particularly of land, when a family member is deceased without male descendants. Among the responsibilities would be those of purchasing the release of a family member who has sold himself into debt slavery or of ensuring justice when a family member has been killed, by exacting vengeance if necessary.

The people of God viewed as “the family of God” is an important conceptual metaphor in the Old Testament. Given the importance of the role of a גֹּאֵל (go'el) for Hebrew families, it is not surprising that God would be regularly compared to a גֹּאֵל (go'el). In those cases, the word is often translated as “Redeemer” in English, bringing into focus one of the responsibilities of a גֹּאֵל (go'el)—that of buying a family member out of slavery. But such a translation usually fails to activate the larger conceptual metaphor of someone who protects the welfare of the family. In addition, because the title “Redeemer” has such an important place in historical theology, translators often feel pressure to try to find a term that can carry the weight of that theological tradition. The default for many translators has often been to borrow a term from the language of wider communication that is used in theological studies. And unfortunately, such terms are often poorly understood by those who don't have a theological education.

But it is not uncommon for traditional societies to have a word to refer to someone who has a similar responsibility in their culture for maintaining the stability of the family. Given such a word, translators can explore the various contexts in Scripture where the word גֹּאֵל (go'el) refers to a man. If necessary, they can experiment with modifications in contexts where it doesn't fit well. Finally, they can test to find out whether God can be compared to someone who

fulfills these responsibilities. If so, such a term has the potential to be both more accessible, and able to tie the term into the broader conceptual metaphor of “the family of God.”

## **Other features of KTOT**

The Key Terms of the Old Testament gives translators a tool for doing this kind of work. When it gives the contextual uses of a term, in addition to an example, it provides an exhaustive list of references where the term occurs in each context. When using KTOT, whether in Paratext or TW Logos, these references are linked to the Hebrew text which can then be synced to preferred translations. A review of the passage allows the translators to determine whether their proposed translation will work in all of those passages. It also provides a quick way to check for consistency of translation within a given context. In addition, KTOT provides significant information on the cultural background of these key terms, some grammatical insight, where it is helpful, comparison with similar and contrastive terms, and help with translation issues.

## **How to access KTOT**

The Key Terms of the Old Testament is available for translators in both Paratext and TW Logos. It is presently part of the installation package for Paratext 9. To access it, go to Open... select Dictionaries, and click on KTOTSLD. At last check, it had been updated to the 4th release.

To access KTOT in TW Logos go to the Library, and in the search window, type: KTOT, and when it comes up double-click on it to open. At present, KTOT in TW Logos is available in its 3rd release.

KTOT has been doing incremental publishing as our history of releases show. As well as making us able to provide new articles on a regular basis, incremental publishing also allows us to revise or adapt articles in response to feedback. As you use the tool, please let us know if you find any errors, have any questions, or suggestions for improvement.

It sometimes takes a while for the Paratext or TW Logos teams to update for a new release. If you would like to ensure you have the latest release for Paratext, feel free to check at:

<https://paratext.org/download/download-paratext-extras/>. Be sure to scroll to the bottom of the page and follow the directions there to update KTOT as a Paratext dictionary.

We welcome your feedback. Please contact us by writing to me: paul\_mclarren@sil.org, or to dick\_kroneman@sil.org. If your comment relates to a software issue, feel free to copy: paul\_orear@sil.org. Thank you for your help!