

Essential Bible Translation Skills

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A translation team translating the Bible into a particular language must possess all the skills listed in this paper in order to produce a good quality translation. The number of skills required is finite, but the number of ways in which these skills can be distributed among the members of a translation team is limitless. This paper explores what the consequences are if we look at achieving a good quality translation of the Bible in this way.

0. Introduction

This paper lists all the skills required by a translation *team* to produce a good quality translation of the Bible. I will use the term *translation team* to refer to a group of people who are working together to translate the Bible in a given language and I will use the term *local team* to refer to the members of the team who are members of the target language group. The size of a translation team can be a few people, or a large number. The translation team, usually, but not necessarily always, includes one or more *non-local team members*, who will contribute the skills not available in the local team. In a project where the local team members have many of the skills needed to translate the Bible, the non-local member will provide only those few skills that are lacking in the local team. In projects where few of these skills are available, the non-local member of the translation team will need to supply many skills, often the more analytical skills, while the local team members contribute the more intuitive skills. Between these two extremes there is a virtually limitless variety in the make-up of translation teams, and of the contribution the non-local team member makes to the team.

The next section of this paper lists the total set of skills required to translate the Bible into another language. (For a fuller description of these skills, see the separate paper: [The total set of skills](#).) The main purpose of this list is to provide us with an instrument that will help us to determine the skills that are present or missing in a particular translation project, and by doing so determine the role the non-local member(s) will have to play in the project.

The final section of this paper explores some of the practical outcomes of this approach.

1. The total set of skills required to translate the Bible

Bible translation involves the transfer of text from one language into another, so a number of the skills have to do with this process. This includes knowledge of the text to be translated (*Skill set 1*), knowledge of the target language (*Skill set 2*), and the transfer process itself (*Skill set 3*). A translation of the Bible must not only be of good quality, but it must also be acceptable to the target audience, and special skills are required to achieve this (*Skill set 4*). Besides these basic translation skills, there are also a number of administrative and management skills required to complete the job (*Skill set 5*).

1.1. 1. Language and Bible skills

This set of skills has to do with the correct understanding of the source text. The skills in this set are: Knowledge of biblical languages; knowledge of the national language; biblical knowledge and exegetical skills.

1.2. 2. Target language and culture skills

This set of skills has to do with a correct understanding of the target language and culture. The skills in this set are: Intuitive knowledge of the language and culture, and analytical knowledge of the language and culture.

1.3. 3. Transfer skills

This set of skills has to do with the actual transfer of a text from one language to another; it includes both intuitive and analytical knowledge of translation principles.

1.4. 4. Skills related to producing an acceptable translation

This set of skills has to do with producing a translation that is acceptable to the target community. These include both intuitive as well as analytical knowledge of the culture, as well as communication and promotion skills.

1.5. 5. Administrative and technical skills

These skills are needed to process materials in an orderly way from the first draft to the ultimate publication of the Scriptures. Skills in this set are: Team building, training, management, administrative, keyboarding, computer and financial management.

1.6. The ability to speak the local language

After presenting these ideas once to a forum of fellow translation consultants, the question arose if the ability to speak the local language should also be listed as a skill. The underlying notion of this paper is that the skills are spread out over the various members of the translation team. In order for the team members to share their specific skills with the rest of the team, they *must* have a language in common.

If the advisor/consultant does not speak the language of the local translation team, *and if* there are members in the team who *only* speak that language, then he or she will have difficulty sharing his skills with those team members, and the comments they make during translation committee meetings can easily be missed. In that context, the non-local member should learn the target language, so he or she can communicate freely with the other team members.

If on the other hand, all the members of the local translation team have a language in common with the non-local member of the team, they can use that language in their meetings, just like the King James translators used Latin during their translation meetings.

2. Practical outcomes of this approach

Once we have determined the skills that are available in a particular local translation team, we can compare them with the above list of skills. This will tell us which skills are missing in the local translation team, and which skills will therefore need to be supplied by the non-local member(s) of the team. We will also know how the skills are divided up over the members of the

team, which will help us design a project that reflects the make-up of the team. This approach to management can be applied to any Bible translation project but we have found it to be especially useful when an experienced translation advisor/consultant is assisting a number of translation teams in related languages.

Other features of this approach to managing Bible translation projects:

- Each translation team will require a different set of skills to be supplied by the non-local member of the team.
- The training that should be given to each of the members of the local translation team will vary greatly, depending on the composition of the team, what skills are missing and the interest and ability of the individual team members.
- The non-local team members can be expat translation advisors/consultants. Consultant checking in this context is done by one consultant who will work with the team during the various stages of the translation process, familiarizing him/herself in depth in the target language. This works best for consultant who limit themselves to a cluster of related languages (For more detail on this concept, see the paper [*An alternative approach to consultant checking.*](#))
- Expat translation advisors and consultants who have been heavily involved in a Bible translation project will have gained an extremely rare set of skills: Biblical and linguistic knowledge, in-depth understanding of a culture very different from their own, the process of Bible translation etc. and every effort should be made to retain them. Often the team needs to be back in their home country at the completion of a translation project, and this time is ideally suited to receive more training so they can return to the field with even more skills to offer to the local translation teams.
- Other non-local team members can be local translation advisors who have completed a translation in a related language. In the process of being heavily involved in a translation project in their own language, they have acquired many of the skills that are typically missing in the local team. They can make an excellent contribution serving the local team alongside the non-local translation consultant, reducing the number of skills that consultant need to supply to the team.
- Like their expat counterparts, the non-expat translation advisors will also greatly benefit from extra training at the completion of the project in their own language, and suitable training tracks should be designed for them so they have an even larger number of skills to offer to related language projects.
- In this model there is no fixed set of requirements for the various roles in the translation team. Instead of trying to establish the academic qualifications for advisors, translators and reviewers, all members of a language group who are committed to the Bible translation task can play an active role in the translation team, using their specific skills.

3. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to establish the set of skills required to produce a good quality translation. This, in turn, helps us to design a translation project in a way that fits with the local context of the project. Instead of expecting local Bible translators to have uniform training and education levels, I suggest that we should examine each translation team on its own merits, so that we can determine the skills that are present and those that are lacking. Based on this information, we will then know the degree and type of training needed and the skills that will need to be supplied additionally from outside.