

Quality Bible Translations in Minority Languages. Can it be done?

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This paper aims to establish that a Bible team translating the Bible in a minority language can have the same level of quality as a translation carried out by a large, well-funded team in a national language. In order to validate this claim, the paper first looks at the criteria of a good quality translation, and then investigates how these criteria are affected by the different contexts in which Bible translation takes place. The final conclusion states what conditions must be met in minority Bible translation projects to achieve good quality translations.

Introduction

All Bible translators will agree that they strive for the best possible quality. Most translators also agree that the resources available to a translation team working on a major translation like the NIV will be different from the resources available to a translation team working on a translation in a minority language spoken by just a few thousand people. A team translating for a major language typically can employ a range of scholars as part of the team. This is clearly stated in the preface of the NIV (1978:vii):

The New International Version is ...made by over a hundred scholars, working directly from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. ... In 1967 the New York Bible Society International ... generously undertook financial sponsorship of the project – a sponsorship that has made it possible to enlist the help of many distinguished scholars.

On the other hand a team translating the Bible into a minority language simply does not have such resources available. It seems only reasonable to assume that a translation produced without such an abundance of scholars and finance must be of lesser quality than one which does have these resources. But is that true? Before we answer that question, we need to look more closely at what we mean by quality.

Defining Quality

Traditionally we have discussed the quality of a translation in terms of three criteria: *accuracy, naturalness and clarity*. A fourth criterion has recently been added to this list. David Andersen (1998:1) calls it the criterion of perceived authenticity. He describes it in relation to the other three criteria like this:

When I was studying translation at SIL, I was taught three criteria for evaluating the quality of a translation, namely accuracy, clarity, and naturalness. This article proposes a fourth criterion: perceived authenticity. ... Perceived authenticity is the receptor audience's perception that the text is an authentic and trustworthy version of the original message. Why do we need a fourth criterion? I suggest that many of the controversies about translation, such as debates about literal translation versus dynamic equivalence, are really debates about authenticity, even though the debate is couched in terms of accuracy. But it is perceived authenticity that more often causes

translations to be accepted or rejected. And it is authenticity that is implicitly used to judge translations.

Jim Mudge (1997:65) calls this the criterion of acceptability:

The last critical quality of a good translation is acceptability. It is assumed that a translation is to be used. But in order to use it, people must accept the translation as an accurate and meaningful translation of the original message. The translator needs to know who will be the primary users of the translation. The translator also needs to know if the primary audience is Christian or non-Christian. If the intended audience is the people of the church, as it is in most cases, then their opinion of the translation is the single most important factor influencing acceptability. If they do not accept and esteem the translation, then it is unlikely that it will be used.

In discussing the merits of the term *acceptability* over the term *perceived authenticity* Iver Larsen has this to say about acceptability as the fourth criterion of a good translation (2001:44):

The crucial nature of acceptability of a translation has long been recognized. And most of Anderson's points can be described under that term, which has the added benefit of emphasizing that it is the receptor audience that judges acceptability.

And in the summary of his paper (2001:52,53) he stresses:

Acceptability should be a major concern to translators. In many situations, a modern translation may initially be rejected because the receptor audience has a different perspective on translation and different views about what a good translation is.

I think we are all agreed then that this fourth criterion of a good translation adds the perspective of target audience to the other three, more objective, criteria of good quality. In other words, a translation must not only **be** good quality, it must also **be perceived to be** good quality. This principle holds true whether we are translating the Bible into a major or a minority language. The expectations of target audiences vary greatly though, because the target audiences themselves vary greatly. For the sake of the point this paper is trying to make, we will limit ourselves to two broad categories of target audiences: **major** and **minority** languages, and see how the people represented by these two types hold different sets of expectations regarding the quality of a Bible translation, and hence how their translations must reflect these differences to be perceived to be of good quality.

Two broad categories of Target Audiences

Major Language Groups

The people in these groups speak the major languages of the world. Many of these languages are national languages. These vary from languages spoken in only one country such as Finnish, to languages spoken in many different countries, such as French and English. Translations in these languages will typically be used for a wide variety of purposes. As well as being read in private, they will be read publicly from the pulpit, studied in seminaries, quoted in sermons and articles, and compared with other translations in the same language. They will be scrutinized by biblical scholars with knowledge of both the source text and the target language and used as a resource or source text by Bible translators translating into other languages. Often there is more than one translation available in these languages, each aiming for a particular target audience, i.e. Catholic or Protestant, children or adults, churched or non-churched, etc. For the majority of people speaking these languages

translations of the Bible in this language will be the only one they can use, i.e. most Americans can only read the Bible in English.

Minority Language Groups

In many countries there is a good number of local, or minority, languages besides the major national language(s).

A Bible translated into one of these minority languages will typically only be used by the people who speak that language as their mother tongue. It will be used both in churches and in personal devotions. There will normally be only one version of the Bible in that language and this version will have to serve all the people in the community. No luxury here of having one translation for those who prefer a more literal translation and another one for those who want a “living” Bible. Often only parts of the Bible are translated into these languages, and people will still depend on translations in a major language for the remaining parts of the Bible. Many of the people using these translations are newly literate and the Bible may be the first and only book they will ever own. Increasingly, people in these language groups become better educated, will read the Bible in a language of wider communication, and compare their own language Bible with other Bible translations.

Quality Bible translations for these two groups

Bible translations for both of these groups must be accurate, clear, natural, and they must be acceptable to the target audience. These four criteria interact with each other, and the translator often has to balance one criterion against another. David Andersen (1998:12, 13) gives many examples of balancing perceived authenticity against the other criteria of quality, and concludes the article by stating:

Making a good translation always requires creative compromise in the face of conflicting demands. The competing requirements of accuracy, naturalness, clarity, and perceived authenticity are often at odds with one another. While no one criterion should be given automatic priority at the expense of the others, at times one must be prepared to sacrifice a little on one criterion in order to achieve a better overall result. The best compromise is one that allows all four criteria to be achieved to a large degree, even if not one hundred percent. ...Remember that there comes a point at which gains in clarity and accuracy are offset by losses in perceived authenticity.

In the rest of this paper I will look at the four criteria of quality in Bible translation, and how these are typically dealt with in major and the minority language translation projects. This will help us to draw conclusions in relation to the overall quality of Bible translations for both of these types of language groups.

Accuracy

Is it possible for translators who do not know the Biblical languages to translate accurately? Before we answer this question, we must examine the underlying assumption, namely: translations made directly from the original texts are reliable because they accurately reflect the source text. But is this true?

If we compare two translations that both claim to have been translated straight from the original, it should follow that they both must accurately reflect the original. They may vary in how they express the meaning of that text, but we would expect the meaning to be the same. However this is not always the case. There are many places where scholars disagree with each other in what they believe to be the exact meaning of the text. Consequently the national language translations based on these scholarly opinions also vary in meaning. Compare for example the rendering for Ecclesiastes 8:3 in the NIV and TEV:

Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. (NIV, emphasis mine)

The king can do anything he likes, **so depart from his presence**; don't stay in such a dangerous place. (TEV, emphasis mine).

If two of these translations vary in meaning, can they both accurately reflect the same original? And what original are we talking about? So, it is simply not true that translating from the source text will inevitably result in an accurate translation. So when we ask ourselves if it is possible for translators who do not know the Biblical languages to translate accurately, we must bear in mind that even translators who do translate directly from the Biblical languages will at times be less accurate than we would be inclined to think. A better question to ask may be: How can translators working in minority languages produce accurate translations, even though they are not translating directly from the original texts? I suggest that when the following two criteria are met, the resulting translations will be as good as any translation that has been made directly from the original:

1. We use a major language Bible as our source text.
2. We look at the Bible translation task as a team effort.

Let us look at these two approaches in detail.

1. **We use a major language Bible as our *primary* source text.** This does not mean that translators should base their work on just one translation, but it is best to use one translation as the *primary* source texts, and use the other translations and other resources such as the UBS Handbooks, Translation Notes, the Translator's Reference Translation etc. to get a better grasp of the meaning of the text.

What do we gain, and what do we lose if we designate one of the major language translations as our primary source text?

To begin with, it saves time, because we do not have to re-invent the wheel and try to work out for ourselves what the original text actually means; we only need to work out what the national language text means. And that can already be quite a daunting task for a translator of a minority language with less than perfect skills in the national language he or she is translating from.

The choice of source text will determine the meaning of the text. In an ideal world we would find at least one perfect national language Bible in each major language. But in actual fact we find some of the national language Bibles so literal that they are extremely difficult to use as source texts, while others are so free in their interpretation that they have become useless as a source text. Some translation teams have had to produce their own source text, or front translation, to function as source text for a number of translations.

The choice of primary source text is one of the most important decisions to be made by the translation team. I have found that the criterion of acceptability is of paramount importance in this decision, so it will be discussed further under that heading.

Because of linguistic and semantic differences between languages, there will always be some loss of meaning when we translate from one language to another. This also holds true for major language translations made from the original texts. Translators who use a major language as their source text can potentially double this loss of meaning because of the two steps involved in their translation. However, if they are aware of some of the differences between the major language they are translating from and Hebrew and Greek, they can often reverse the shortcomings of the major language translation. This is especially true if their language correlates better with the Biblical language than the major language. For example, both Greek and Hebrew and most other civilized languages distinguish between singular and plural 2nd person pronouns. But not English. So a translator who is translating the Bible into

a minority language, using an English translation of the Bible as his or her source text, will need to go back to the original text to discover which “you” he is translating. Compare for example Matthew 5:21 and 22 with verse 23:

5:21 **You** have heard ...22 But I tell **you** that... 23 Therefore, if **you** are offering **your** gift at the altar... (NIV).

The context makes it clear that verse 21 is plural (Jesus is addressing the crowd), and that verse 23 is singular (Jesus uses the singular throughout the example). However, verse 22 could be either “you” singular or “you” plural. So there is an ambiguity in the English text that does not exist in the original, and which can be corrected in the minority language translation since the minority language translator will be forced by his grammar to make the distinction between singular and plural “you”.

Translations in related languages or back translations in languages where these problems have already been dealt with are some of the places where a minority language translator without biblical languages skills can discover which “you” to use in his translation. **But there must be someone on the team with Biblical languages skills**, to catch many of the pitfalls inherent in using a major language translation as the primary source text. This brings us to the second criteria for producing accurate translations in minority languages.

2. **We look at the Bible translation task as a team effort.** As long as there is one person on the team with skills in the original languages, the entire team will benefit from his or her expertise. That person does not have to be the person who makes the first draft of the translation. If the person who drafts the translation does not know Greek or Hebrew, the person on the team who does possess this skill will have to be extra alert when he or she is checking the translation, especially those places where this lack of knowledge by the translator may cause problems.

The team approach to translation has other benefits as well. In many societies it is much more acceptable to spread the work over the entire community, rather than one or two people doing it on their own. In the Pacific it is common for language groups to make a clear distinction between “community projects” and “private projects”.

Working as a team also allows people with limited set of skills to play their part in the translation work, as long as all the skills required in the translation of the Bible are present in the translation team.

Naturalness and Clarity

The fact that we have a translation that is **accurate** only fulfills one of the criteria of a translation of good quality. The translation must also be **natural** and **clear**. Translators in both minority and major languages are trained in translation principles, and are usually mother tongue speakers of the languages into which they are translating. Consequently, naturalness and clarity have an even chance of being achieved in both of these translation contexts, as long as the translators know what the original text means, and have received proper training in expressing themselves in natural and clear language. Recently I have been checking the revision of the Kapingamarangi New Testament published in 2000. It was interesting to note that many of the changes seem to indicate a switch from an oral style to a written style of the language. Now that people have been reading their New Testaments for a number of years, they realize that some of the phrases and words that they would use in natural speech are not needed in written documents. When the Kapingamarangi translators worked on their revision of the New Testament, they deleted many phrases that were superfluous in their language. In particular translations of the English phrases “to me, to us, to you” can be left out in written style, as directional markers preceding these phrases already indicate in which direction the action is going.

Translators will need to be trained in issues of naturalness. The team member with analytical linguistic skills will be the key person to train the members of the local translation team in the specific issues that affect their translation. Typical areas that need attention are discourse features such as participant reference, discourse particles, tense/aspect marking, order of clauses within the sentence, and how to begin a new paragraph.

Acceptability

In major language translation projects, the target audience will expect a team of translators to be working directly from the original languages. Consequently, a number of biblical language scholars will be an essential part of the team. The publishers also want the intended audience *to know* that this has been done. For example, the Preface to the NIV states:

The New International Version is a completely new translation of the Holy Bible made by **over a hundred scholars working directly from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts**. (1978: vii, emphasis mine)

Similarly, the introduction to the New Living Translation states that:

The translators of the Old Testament used the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible as their standard text. ... The translators of the New Testament used the two standard editions of the Greek New Testament ... These two editions ... represent the best in modern textual scholarship. (1996: xlii)

Often there is more than one translation available in these major languages, and each translation targets its own audience. So, when we read in the Note to Readers of the New Living Translation (1996: xxxix) that *sixty evangelical scholars* were commissioned to revise The Living Bible, we know that the target audience is the evangelical community. Evangelical audiences will be inclined to trust a translation produced by respected scholars from their own theological background, even though they do not personally know any of the translators.

Unlike the audiences of the major languages, the speakers of minority languages normally do not expect the translators of their Bible to be experts in Biblical languages. In these projects, the target audiences often know who the translators are, and they will have their own ideas on what makes a good translator, e.g. they must be respected members of the community, be in good standing in the church, be known to be good language speakers, be trained ministers, etc. Getting the right team together is just as big a challenge in a minority language project as it is in a major language project. In both cases it is essential that the team is respected by and acceptable to the target audience, even though the criteria used by the two target audiences may be quite different.

Translators producing the major language translations may have the best credentials, but they too must consider their target audience, and so must balance accuracy with acceptability. For example, the preface to the NIV states:

The Committee also sought some measure of continuity with the long tradition of translating the Scriptures into English... (1978: vii)

In other words, the target audience has certain expectations based on tradition, and the translators must take these expectations into account in order to have a translation acceptable to their target audience. This principle of paying close attention to tradition is especially evident in the translation of the name of God. The preface to the NIV (1978: ix) states:

In regard to the divine name YHWH, commonly referred to as the Tetragrammaton, the translators adopted the device **used in most English versions** of rendering that

name as “LORD” in capital letters to distinguish it from Adonai, another Hebrew word rendered “Lord,” for which small letters are used. (Emphasis mine).

I think most of us agree that *the LORD* does not accurately reflect the Hebrew four letters *YHWH*, the so-called Tetragrammaton, yet we see the same solution in virtually all major European translations of the Bible.¹ Translators in major languages have to balance accuracy against target audience expectations, and, in this particular instance, have allowed the target group expectations to make a less than accurate translation.

The audiences of most of the minority language Bibles do not have this tradition of substituting *YHWH* with *the LORD*, so for them it is much easier to accept a transliteration of *YHWH* in their Old Testaments rather than a substitution by a word meaning *the Lord*. In this case – and I think this is a very important case – the quality of a minority language is actually better than the translation in many of the major language Bibles.

In both minority and major language translation projects, the target audiences expects their Bible translations to be approved by recognized authorities. But they differ in who they consider to be the proper authorities. Target audiences of translations in major languages expect their Bibles to be published by a Bible Society and to have the higher echelon of their denomination officially approve a particular Bible.² Target audiences of a minority language Bible will expect approval to come from local church leaders or the leadership of the national church (synod, bishops...). If the various denominations have been participating in the local translation committee, and this committee has approved the translation, we can expect the community as a whole to accept the translation.

Another big issue related to acceptability in minority languages is the kind of translation produced. Whether we like it or not, the target audience will be comparing their translation with the majority language translation they are most familiar with. For example, in one project we worked in, the KJV had been regarded as the “Holy Bible” ever since the people became Christian, so after discussing this matter with them, their translation committee decided to use the NIV as their primary source text, since this would result in a minority language translation of a style similar to the KJV, and therefore acceptable to the target audience. The translators also relied heavily on Bibles easier to translate and understand for helping them translate the NIV text into their own language. In another project we found the people had been using the TEV in their church services, so their translation committee decided to use that translation as their primary source text. In both cases the end result is greatly modified by looking at all the resources available to the team, but the overall impression people will have when they compare their own translation with the majority language translation is that their translation is a reliable translation of God’s Word.

Other issues of acceptability relate to the choice of certain key Biblical terms or even the spelling. In minority languages there is often more room for discussion on these issues, while in majority languages many of these issues have long been settled.

Conclusion

A good quality translation of the Bible must be accurate, natural and clear. The translation must also be acceptable to the target audience. The first three criteria will get the Bible published, while the last criterion will get the Bible used. In this paper I have pointed out that

¹ For a full discussion of this topic see my article "Translating YHWH" in the on-line *Journal of Translation* 1.1:47–55

² Roman Catholic audiences will expect an Imprimatur in their Bibles, while Evangelical Protestants will more readily accept the New Living Translation when they read that Billy Graham is recommending it.

Bible translators must take all four of these criteria into account, whether they are working in a major language or in a minority language translation project.

In the opening paragraph of this paper I asked myself if it is possible for translation teams working in minority language projects to produce good quality translations without all the resources available to them that are available to teams working in major language projects. My answer to this last question is an emphatic **yes, but only if the following conditions are met:**

1. There is someone on the translation team with a good understanding of Biblical languages. This person may be one of the members of the local translation team, a translation advisor, or a translation consultant. This person should ideally be involved in the drafting of the translation, but his or her input could also happen at a later stage in the translation process. (For more details on the need for this skill see page 1 of the paper: [“The total set of skills required to translate the Bible”](#).)
2. The members of the local translation team must have access to at least one good quality translation of the Bible in a major language that they know well. They should also have access to the UBS handbooks which will help them to better understand the issues that underlie the translation problems they will encounter. If these materials are not available, the translators must be provided with a front translation to use as their source text.
3. The local translation team has been taught how to apply all four of the quality criteria in a well-balanced manner.
4. The members of the translation team, including the advisor and/or internal consultant, must have a language in common. See for more detail on this point the paper [“Essential Bible Translation Skills”](#) (page 2).

When these conditions are met, the resulting translation in the minority language will not only be clear, meaningful and accurate, but it will also be accepted by the target audience as the authoritative Word of God.

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