The Philosophy *and* Practice *of* Bible Translation

A Simplified Explanation for Laymen by Ron Myers–Translator (Revision 4)

The Bible is God's living Word, inspired and inerrant in the original autographs. It is the only means of knowing the revealed truth about God, His character, Creation, the Fall, the human condition, the Plan of Redemption, His will for our lives, future events, etc. It is mankind's only hope, and answer for a lost and dying world.

Bible translation is both a science and an art; a bridge of communication that brings God's eternal Word from ancient times into our contemporary cultures and societies. It generally follows one of the following approaches *(or combinations thereof)* in seeking to accurately convey the sacred message from the original Greek and Hebrew texts into present-day languages. This paper attempts to provide a brief and somewhat simplified sketch (at both ends of the spectrum) of the philosophies, practices, terms, and techniques utilized in modern Bible translation, as well as the various pros and cons encountered and their significance.

1) ***Formal or Literal Equivalence***: Often called "word for word" translation, the *formal* or *literal equivalence* approach seeks to represent each word of the original text with a corresponding word in the translation, so that the reader can see, *word for word,* what the original text said. The primary <u>advantage</u> of this approach is that the Holy Spirit did inspire or breathed-out the *very* words of Scripture in the original autographs, not merely the "thoughts" or "concepts." *(2 Timothy 3:16)*

Therefore, employing a *formal or literal equivalence* technique is best, over the *Dynamic* approach, insofar as it clearly and accurately conveys the meaning of the original words into the target language, without introducing undue difficulty in comprehension. However, <u>disadvantages</u> encountered with a strict *literal* rendering are, it can sometimes result in: awkward word flow; confused meaning transfer; zero meaning transfer; or misrepresentation of the author's intent—depending on language differences.

2) ***Dynamic Equivalence or Paraphrastic***: Often called "thought for thought" or "concept for concept," this approach seeks to convey the meaning of original text, irrespective of wording. The intended goal being to make the translated text clearer, hopefully to have the same impact on modern readers as the original text had on its readers. Dr. Eugene Nida—originator of the *Dynamic Equivalence* concept—later preferred the term *Functional Equivalence* while undertaking the "Good News" translation.

<u>Strengths</u> of the *Dynamic* approach include: readability and understandability, especially if the passage is awkward to render using *Formal or Literal Equivalence.* <u>Weaknesses</u> include potential overutilization which may obscure or contort the original, as in *The Message.* For instance, how can a translator presume to know the original author's intended meaning? ...or be certain of the impact the original text had on its readers? Furthermore, since meaning is always conveyed through words, why not ensure accuracy by using words that are as close as possible in meaning to the original, instead of interpretive terms that might flow well, but misrepresent the true sense of meaning? Likewise, care must be taken to avoid changing verb grammar forms, which can convolute or twist the sense of the original.

3) ***Optimal or Balanced Equivalence***: The benefit of using the *optimal* or *balanced equivalence* technique is that it combines the best of both worlds, since it seeks to take advantage of the best features of both *formal-literal* and *dynamic-paraphrastic equivalence*, while avoiding the drawbacks. In places where a word-for-word rendering is clearly understood, a *formal* or *literal* translation technique is best. Yet translators might weight their work towards either *formal* or *dynamic,* depending on individual philosophy.

In situations where a more *formal-literal* rendering might prove unachievable, due to fundamental differences in language and communication styles, a more *dynamic* rendering is advisable. As a result, a balance between textual accuracy and clarity of meaning can be achieved, along with the primary goal of remaining faithful to the clear meaning of the inspired Word of God. Meanwhile, a user-friendly text for present-day readers is accomplished, providing accurate transference of meaning, combined with relative ease of understanding. *(Note: All things considered, a more formal or literal rendering is preferable, whenever possible.)*

Experienced translators seek to employ a balanced approach between the opposing techniques (*Formal vs Dynamic)*, depending on the level of similarity between the original text and the target language—altering between techniques along a sliding scale as dictated by the passage in focus. The greater the significance of dissimilarity encountered, the greater the potential need to *conservatively* adapt. Even the King James Bible translators employed a combination of these techniques *(Optimal-Balanced)* as the need arose. One of the best, most comprehensive resources available on Bible translation that I use *(which simplifies yet goes into depth on these procedural issues)* is a notable classic: <u>Translating the Word of God</u>, by SIL/WBT translators Drs. John Beekman and John Callow. ISBN 0310207711 (1974).

In conclusion, it needs restating that, due to inherent dissimilarities in languages *(with their respective cultures, traditions, lifestyles, and beliefs),* there will *always* be some loss of information in the exchange, or *extraneous* gain unsupported by the original text. This can occur regardless of whatever translation techniques are employed. Any good translator will seek to keep both potential discrepancies in check. The worth of any translation—training and experience notwithstanding—depends on the translator's vision, philosophy, and ability in the local language and culture, *including* thoroughness of exegesis and especially input by native speakers. These, combined with tenacious dedication to achieve both faithfulness and accuracy to the original text, integrated with fluency and clarity in the target language equal a good translation. This balanced approach to translate God's Word faithfully and accurately (with fluency and clarity), is what this writer strives for—meaningful communication of God's truth—weighted towards a formal or literal rendering as much as possible.