

Principles, Practices *and* Philosophies of Bible Translation

A Simplified Explanation by Ron Myers—Translator (Revision 3.3)

The Bible is God's living Word, inspired by God and fully inerrant in the original autographs of all 66 books. It is the only means of knowing the revealed truth about God, His character, Creation, the Enemy, the Temptation and Fall, the Curse and present human condition, the Promise and plan of Redemption, God's will for our lives, future events, etc. It is mankind's only hope; the 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 extant Greek and Hebrew texts into present-day languages. This paper attempts to provide a brief and somewhat simplified overview of the principles, practices, philosophies, terms and techniques used in modern Bible translation, as well as the various *pros* and *cons* encountered, and their significance. A variety of descriptive nomenclature is used, but these are the more popular.

 Formal

1) **Formal or Literal Equivalence:** Often called "word for word" translation, the *formal equivalence* approach seeks to *faithfully* represent each word of the original text with a corresponding word or words in the target language. The primary advantage of this approach is, the reader can study *word-for-word* what the original text said, since the Holy Spirit inspired or breathed-forth the very words of Scripture, set down through the pens of the original writers, not merely the *thoughts* or *concepts*. (*Exod 34:1,27; Prov 30:5; Luk 4:4; 2 Tim 3:16; Rev 21:5*)

Therefore, employing a *formal or literal equivalence* technique is best, when possible. Also called *complete equivalence*—in contrast to the *dynamic equivalence* approach—it seeks to precisely convey the original "word for word" meaning of the original text into the target language, without introducing undue difficulty in comprehension. Disadvantages encountered with a strict *literal* rendering are, it may result in: awkward or stilted word flow; or even potential distortion of the author's originally intended meaning. Note: These *pros* and *cons* are contingent upon how similar or different the target language functions, compared to the original biblical language being translated.

Dynamic 

2) **Dynamic Equivalence or Paraphrastic:** Often called "thought for thought" or "concept for concept," this approach allows for liberty to alter the text in seeking to convey the original meaning in a more understandable way, irrespective of original wording; the goal being to make the translation communicate more clearly to its readers. Dr. Eugene Nida authored the term "*Dynamic Equivalence*" while translating the *Good News Bible*—intended as a help for missionary translators. Later on, he preferred the term *Functional Equivalence*.

Strengths of the *Dynamic* approach are readability and understandability for the uninitiated. This approach is especially useful when the target language and culture is vastly different or removed, making the passage nearly impossible to render using *formal or literal equivalence*.

Weaknesses include: Not good for serious word study purposes. Extra thorough exegesis is of supreme importance in this case; otherwise the resultant meaning, although fluent, may become distorted. An example of excess paraphrase is *The Message*, an English idiomatic translation that reads superbly, yet takes undo liberties that cannot be supported by the original text it represents. Also, since meaning is conveyed through words, not thoughts, accuracy is better ensured by using terms that more-closely reflect the original text, instead of interpretive terms that might flow well, but potentially misrepresent the true sense of intended meaning. Caution must also be taken not to change verb grammar forms from the original, especially if the altered form convolutes or obscures the original's intended sense.

Optimal  Balanced

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 takes advantage of the best features of both *formal-literal* and *dynamic-paraphrastic* when used with discretion. In the places where a word-for-word rendering is clearly understood, a *formal* or *literal* translation technique is best.

In applications where a more *formal-literal* rendering might prove difficult, due to fundamental differences in language and communication styles, a more *dynamic* rendering might be advisable. As a result, a balance between textual accuracy and clarity of meaning may be achieved, along with the primary goal of maintaining faithfulness to the inspired Word of God. The end result remains a Bible text for present-day readers, 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.*) Different translators may weight their work towards either *formal* or *dynamic*, depending on individual philosophies. However, we are translating the Bible, not creating a commentary.

In conclusion, experienced translators appreciate the need to employ a combination of these divergent techniques, depending on the level of similarity or dissimilarity between the original text and the target language. Altering between styles is necessitated as indicated by the functional adaptability of the target language. The greater the significance in language dissimilarity encountered, the greater the potential need to adapt. (*Even the translators of the King James Bible employed a combination of these techniques, as required.*) One of the most-comprehensive and unbiased resources available on Bible translation, which goes into depth on these procedural steps, is a notable classic: Translating the Word of God, by SIL/WBT translators Drs. John Beekman and John Callow. ISBN 0310207711 (1974)

It needs stating here that, due to inherent dissimilarities in languages (*with their respective cultures, traditions, and beliefs*), there will *always* be some *unintended* loss of information in the exchange, and/or *extraneous* gain, unsupported by the original. This will occur, in fact, regardless of whatever translation techniques are employed. Any good translator will seek to keep both of these 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, and thoroughness of exegesis. These, combined with a tenacious sense of dedication in ¹⁾ achieving faithfulness and accuracy to the original text, and ²⁾ combined with fluency and clarity in the target language, equates to a good translation. This two-fold balanced approach to accuracy is what this writer strives to achieve while translating—heavily weighted towards a more formal or literal rendering, as much as is practically possible, opting for the dynamic equivalence approach only when necessary.

Optimal accuracy and understandability is only achieved when these principles are applied to each section, as the grammatical landscape requires. Conversely, good translation goals cannot be achieved if a highly-ideological translator tries to force only one style overall.