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Getting a Grasp on Retranslation; Yet another English Bible Translation?



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In the beginning

There has been a long-standing debate over whether translation belongs to the domain of the Arts or the Sciences. This debate carries on, as do debates over most dichotomies, however, it is possible to gain a fuller understanding of the intricate and fascinating skill of translating by studying the history of a discourse that is monumental in translation studies and has been translated and retranslated many times. A work well suited to such a study is the English Bible.

One of the first choices to be made by anyone wanting to study the English Bible is which translation to study. Nearly four centuries ago, this would have caused very little ruckus. Bible publishers today however, are offering the public over fifteen different translations in the English language (Zondervan 2001) out of numerous English translations published over the last centuries. With multiple English Bibles on the market a very reasonable question arises: Which translation is the best, the most accurate, the most true to the original? The answer is a matter of opinion. To some, still today, the *King James Version* (or *Authorized Version*), first published in 1611, is the only acceptable translation. But the truth of the matter is that there are multiple motivations for retranslating the Bible. The intention of this paper is to shed some light on why translations age, even the translations of great works with *eternal continuing life* (Benjamin 1997: 154), and subsequently why works must be retranslated.

Are words like good wine... better with age?

To address the first issue, why translations age, it is necessary to consider the very nature of language: Language is a means of communication. It is a system with which human beings express themselves. Human beings are creative beings, who sculpt the malleable substance of language as though it was clay; that is to say that words and phrases, syntax and punctuation can be arranged and rearranged in an infinite number of combinations. Add to this the variable of time, passing, and the evolution of a language, how a word's meaning stretches and shrinks, how some fall out of use and others are created, and one quickly recognizes the creative aspect of language. How can it not change? Indeed, language is not a static entity: It is active and interactive, constantly being manipulated. In fact, it is very difficult, if not impossible to stop language from evolving due to the size of linguistic populations and their geographic dispersion. The quantity of language that can be employed in a single day influences a shift; regular language use each day is sufficient to modify language over time.

A sign of the times

But this is not the entirety of the matter; not only words change. Writing styles, syntax, rhetoric, and grammar evolves. Discoveries are made, philosophies are reformed, social opinions alter, and in turn, the language shifts. Along with this, time comes to

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colour or mark discourse; this phenomenon is known as *historicity*, or the ‘aging’ of discourse. For example, the *King James Version* (hereafter KJV) uses phrases such as *thou hast* whereas the *New International Version* (NIV) employs more modern phraseology like *you have*. When one examines 17th-century discourse though, it becomes apparent that the KJV English follows the discourse of that time period, in the same way that the NIV translation parallels late 20th-century discourse. In the early days of the KJV, it would not have been a difficult translation to read, not nearly as difficult as it is to read today. A modern reader, who reads the KJV today, notices that it is an ‘older’ translation because it is ‘marked’ by the vocabulary, syntax, and style of another period in history. A reader recognizes that *thou hast* is not modern English usage.

Why is it then difficult to extract examples from the NIV translation that are marked by time or culture? This is for one very simple reason—the NIV is a more recent translation, written in the contemporary English of the late 70’s¹. In a few centuries, no doubt, the NIV will appear coloured by time and language development to another generation.

All of this considered, translation could never accomplish the translation, to transcend historicity. Even an excellent translation cannot stand the test of time, because language use does not. It is because the use of language changes that retranslations are produced. Translation and retranslation gives its audience the occasion to read an original work in the light of another era and even another culture. There are multiple approaches to translation.

Retranslation is a response to the development of language variety. So, when a translation is produced, it is one translation (of many possible translations), but not the

translation. There is only one original, but there is not only one translator. Even a translation that is considered a masterpiece could later be competed with by a retranslation motivated by several factors, one being language modernization.

Not quite right

There are various motivations that lead to the retranslation of a work. One may ask: Has the Bible been translated so often in English because the translators never get it quite right? This would be a simple answer, but it is not the case; though sometimes there have been errors in published translations, which will be discussed later. Anthony Pym sets out two types of retranslation: *passive* and *active* retranslation (Pym 1998, 82).

If at first you don't succeed, translate again

Pym uses the term *passive retranslation* to refer to retranslation motivated by linguistic and cultural evolution in the target society. This returns to the notion of language development. The *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) embodies Pym's notion of *passive retranslation* in several regards. First of all, one of the main reasons for undertaking the project was "the modernization of English"². The RSV committee referred back to two translations, the KJV and the *American Standard Version* (ASV) of 1901, publishing the Revised Standard Version in 1952. The retranslation was not a result of criticism towards the KJV, but a response to developments in language and style since the earlier publications. Alterations were made to the RSV, and the new edition was published in

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1962, adding the use of quotation marks to indicate direct speech. Revising and updating also fall under the heading of passive retranslation. Below is an excerpt from the book of Ephesians to compare the ASV with the RSV:

Ephesians 4:22-24

American Standard Version

22 that ye put away, as concerning your former manner of life, the old man, that waxeth corrupt after the lusts of deceit; 23 and that ye be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new man, that after God hath been created in righteousness and holiness of truth.

Revised Standard Version

22 Put off your old nature, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

The old English *ye*, *waxeth*, and *hath* are not used in the RSV because they were outdated and no longer being used.

In 1989, a significant retranslation of the RSV was produced, called the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). A group of 32 scholars were able to complete the project that made modifications, without completely reworking the text. One of their concerns was for language complexity, and where possible, they used inclusive pronouns³. To better understand some of the alterations the translators made, a comparison can be made between a verse in the RSV, and its comparable NSRV translation:

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Romans 5:6-7

Revised Standard Version

6 While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

7 Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die.

New Revised Standard Version

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

In the NRSV, verse 7 begins with “indeed” rather than “why”, showing a modernization and simplification of language. Similarly, the translators of the NRSV rendered the original idea with the modern conditional verb use “might”, replacing “will” from the RSV, which would come across differently to contemporary English readers. An illustration of inclusive-language use in retranslation is manifested in the NRSV’s decision to use “person” where the RSV uses “man”.

Taking action

The second category of retranslation that Pym refers to is *active retranslation*; this is a retranslation motivated by opposition to a translation. In one sense, the Bible translation movement that swept Europe after the Reformation demonstrated this kind of retranslation. It was a movement that saw its beginning with Luther’s criticism of the Catholic Church.

The KJV was an early example of active retranslation in the history of English Bible translation. King James I, of England, summoned the translation in 1604, in response to concerns expressed by Puritans. The complaints of the people were that the

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Bibles that were circulating at the time contained imperfections. On top of this, church leaders frowned upon Bibles of the time presenting marginal notes. These compounded complaints lead the King to order a new translation, later to be given his name³.

When push comes to shove

After the KJV was produced, and became widely acclaimed as a masterpiece, there was no consideration towards retranslating the Bible into English for some time. In fact, the KJV received such approval and was give such prestige in the eyes of readers that when committees gathered to produce a more accurate translation, based on “recent discoveries of Hebrew and Greek textual sources”⁴ they could not stray too far from the KJV and ASV translations; the influence of previous works delimited their approach, so that the translation would not appear radical or avant-garde. Even when the KJV was retranslated more accurately, by rectifying translation errors, the *Revised Version* did not experience success (World 1999). This goes to show that even when improvements are made on a translation it does not guarantee that the readership will be interested in updating to the more accurate translation.

In contemporary Bible retranslation examples of active retranslation can be found as well. The *New Living Translation* (NLT) considers itself to be “the first adult-level Bible translated by evangelical scholars using the dynamic-equivalence (thought-for-thought) method of translation”⁵. This quote raises questions about the NIV translation, which originally demonstrated *dynamic equivalence*, coined by Nida.

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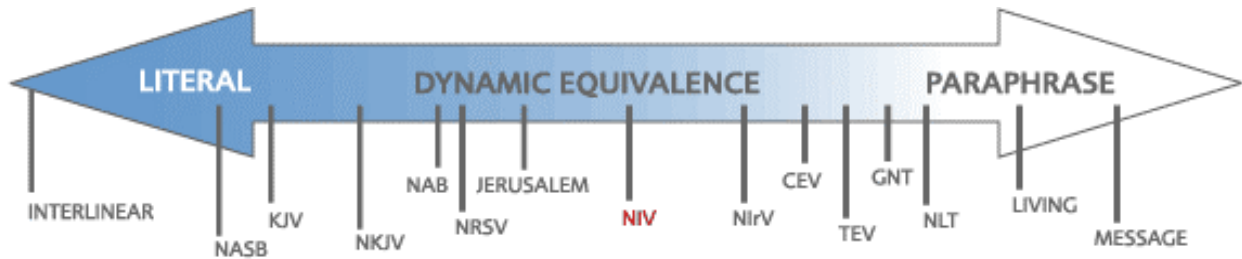


Figure 1 ⁶

The NIV, traditionally known as the epitome of dynamic equivalence, is placed at the centre of Zondervan's Bible translation continuum. In contrast, the NLT is closer to the right, to the paraphrase end. Considering the sources of assessment, Zondervan would seem to have a more objective viewpoint, while the New Living Translation website would probably cater to its own marketability. Taking this into account, one can see that even Bible translators differ in opinion of each other's methods for translation.

After the NIV's completion in 1978, Nida himself explained his approach to Bible translation as follows: "Interlingual equivalence can never be an absolute or mathematical equivalence. There can, however, be a communicative equivalence, something that is effective in obtaining an appropriate response" (in Metzger 1993: 751). Comparing a couple of verses from the translations can provide better insight:

Romans 12:10-12

NIV (Zondervan 1989: 1291)

10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

New Living Translation

10 Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. 11 Never be lazy in your work, but serve the Lord enthusiastically. 12 Be glad for all God is planning for you. Be patient in trouble, and always be prayerful.

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In the 11th verse, where the NIV translation reads, “never be lacking in zeal”, the NLT reads, “never be lazy in your work”. It is difficult to determine which translation is more dynamically equivalent. It would seem that the NLT does follow through on using layperson’s vocabulary, as it claims to do⁷. But at the same time, the NIV does express the original idea in clear, contemporary English. The matter at hand is the audience in question—does the reader easily understand the words “zeal”, “fervor”, and “affliction”? Naturally, it depends on the reader. It cannot be denied that the use of these words is not common in contemporary mainstream discourse as the use of words such as “lazy”, “enthusiastically” and “trouble”, as translated in the NLT. Again, it comes down to a matter of preference; the reader who understands the wording of the NIV is free to choose between the two. The reading-level and translation methodology of various translations are presented in the following chart from the NLT website:

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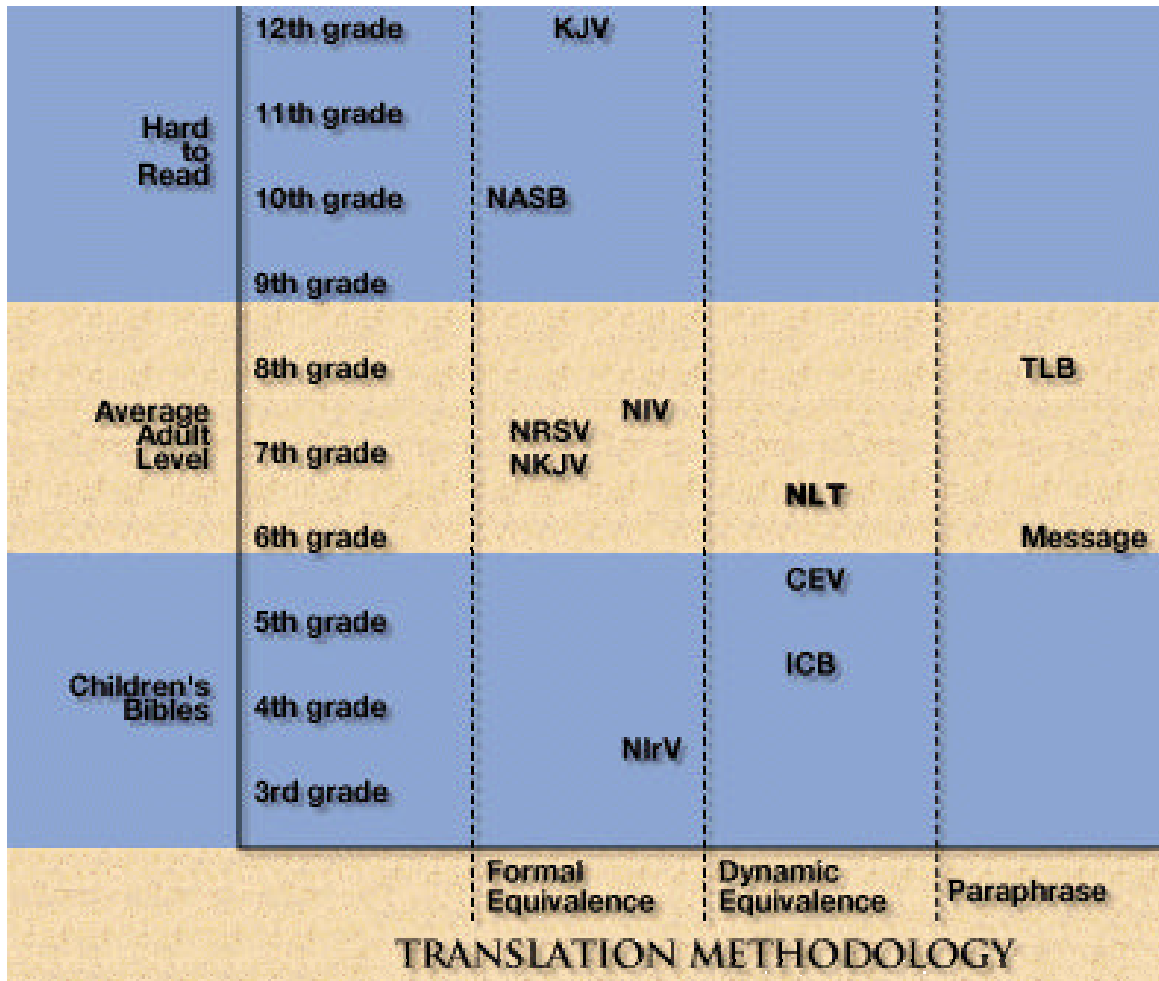


Figure 2⁸

Key to Translations	
CEV	- Contemporary English Version
ICB	- International Children's Bible, New Century Version
KJV	- King James Version
Message	- The Message
NASB	- New American Standard Bible
Nlrv	- New International Readers Version
NIV	- New International Version
NKJV	- New King James Version
NLT	- New Living Translation
NRSV	- New Revised Standard Version
TLB	- The Living Bible

In Figure 2 the horizontal axis runs from literal translations to paraphrasing, with dynamic equivalence in the centre. The vertical axis covers the reading levels of various English translations. The viewer can carefully note that the NIV has been shifted to the “formal equivalence” range, pushing the NLT to the place with the highest reading level among dynamically equivalent

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translations. It should be noted that the difference in opinion, regarding dynamic equivalence rating, could be influenced by the newness of the NLT translation (1996, compared to 1978 & 1983 for the NIV). Over nearly a 20-year-span, the NIV's English has likely shifted as well. The shifting of a language can influence what is considered a dynamically equivalent translation. In other words, perhaps the NLT today is what the NIV was 20 years ago; this however, does not explain Zondervan's continuum, published in 2001.

When all is said and done...

After having taken a closer look at English Bible translations, a better appreciation is found for the intricacy and the immensity of a single language. There is no straightforward answer to the question: What translation is the most accurate one? Again, it comes back to what is implied by the word *accurate*. Is an *accurate* translation one that translates word for word, or one that paraphrases? Is it one that seeks to preserve the original in its context, or transfer it into a more modern context through language use? Does it write at a 4th-grade or a 12th-grade level? In the end, it comes down to an individual decision.

The Bible translations that students choose between today will shift in *readability* in the time to come. This is symptomatic of the ebb and flow of language; some words and meanings flow out as with the tide, and other are drawn in. In Colin Clair's words, "each generation must make its own version [with] the findings of modern scholarship

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and the inevitable growth and development of the English language” (1963: 49). Perhaps the most splendid of all is the *eternal continuing life* of translating the Bible.

¹ <http://www.zondervanbibles.com/niv.htm>

² <http://www.zondervanbibles.com/nrsv.htm>

³ <http://www.zondervanbibles.com/kjv.htm>

⁴ <http://www.zondervanbibles.com/nasb.htm>

⁵ <http://www.newlivingtranslation.com/faq/faq8.html>

⁶ <http://www.zondervanbibles.com/translations.htm>

⁷ <http://www.newlivingtranslation.com/faq/faq6.html>

⁸ <http://www.newlivingtranslation.com/faq/faq8.html>

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* All verses quoted from Bible translations were found at: www.crosswalk.com, unless otherwise noted.