Hart Wiens

BIBLE TRANSLATION IN CANADA

> ***Translation is impossible. This is a reality that every member of our profession knows, or eventually discovers. In Islam it is held that "any translation of the Quran immediately ceases to be the literal word of Allah, and hence cannot be equated with the Quran in its original Arabic form."[1] The famous Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik was not quite as categorical about translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, but he made a similar point when he said, "Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your bride through a veil."[2]***

Christians also acknowledge that "no translation [of the Bible], regardless of how well it is done, can capture and convey to the reader everything of the original."[3] Yet, the Christian Bible is the most translated book of all time. Dr. Lamin Sanneh, Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University, states that, in contrast to Islam, "translatability became the characteristic mode of Christian expansion through history."[4]

Bible translation was an important activity for many of the early Christian missionaries sent to serve indigenous peoples in Canada. Portions of the Bible were published in Mohawk as early as 1787 and the Moravians published Scriptures in the language of the Inuit of Labrador in 1810[5]. Throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, both Catholics and Protestants incorporated Bible translation as integral components of their missionary endeavours. Among them, James Evans stands out for his invention of the syllabic system of writing for some of the Canadian Aboriginal languages. Evans first experimented with syllabic writing while working among the Ojibwe at Rice Lake in the 1830s. Church officials did not approve his first proposal. However, in 1840, when he was transferred to Norway House as Superintendent of Missions for the Wesleyan Methodist Church in the Hudson's Bay Territory, he returned to his syllabic system as a means of writing the Cree language. While at Norway House, he began to translate and publish Cree language materials, using syllabic characters carved in wood, lead melted from the linings of tea chests, ink made from soot mixed with fish oil, and birchbark for paper. Evans became known as "the man who made birchbark talk."[6] The Cree people found syllabic writing easy to learn and it quickly became highly popular in their communities. In 1861, 15 years after Evans' death, the British and Foreign Bible Society in London (the institution which gave birth to the Canadian Bible Society) published the entire Bible in Cree syllabics.

About a decade after Evans' initial Cree publications in syllabic script, John Horden, working at Moose Factory (along with fellow British missionary E. A. Watkins at Fort George), began producing materials in Inuktitut using an adaptation of Evans' syllabics. The use of syllabic writing in Inuktitut took root in 1876, after Edmund Peck began his work among the Inuit in the areas we now know as Nunavik and Nunavut. The ease of

learning the syllabic orthography is one of the factors credited for the rapid spread of the Christian message and for the growth of the Anglican Church among the Inuit of the Eastern Arctic.

The introduction of syllabic writing

Bible translation in pre-literate communities typically begins with linguistic research and the establishment of a suitable orthography for the language. The introduction of syllabic writing is one of the great contributions to indigenous language development in Canada that emerged from the early missionary involvement in Bible translation. Syllabic writing is well suited to agglutinative languages such as Cree and Inuktitut. The morphology of these languages tends to generate extremely long words which are difficult to read when written phonemically. The orthographic representation of syllables rather than sounds reduces the length of words considerably. This is a great benefit to readers and helps explain why this form of writing became so popular among the Cree as well as the Inuit. Today, syllabic writing is so firmly entrenched among the Inuit that it is regarded as one of the defining features of their language and culture.

While Bible translation in Inuktitut dates back to at least 1810 among the Inuit of Labrador and to the mid1800s among the Inuit of Nunavut and Nunavik, a new era was ushered in with the establishment of the Common Language Inuktitut Bible Translation project in 1978. The project was initiated when the Anglican Church Diocese of The Arctic came to the Bible Society to request assistance in the production of a new Common Language version of the Bible in Eastern Arctic Inuktitut. The Bible Society sponsored a translation seminar lead by Dr. Eugene Nida, who was Translations Secretary of the American Bible Society at the time. Dr. Nida is sometimes referred to as the father of modern Bible translation for his articulation of the theory of dynamic equivalence (later referred to as functional equivalence) translation in *Toward A Science of Translating* in 1964 and *The Theory and Practice of Translation in 1969.*[7]

The Eastern Arctic Inuktitut project broke with the more literal or formal correspondence translation methods used by the early European missionaries and began to apply Nida's principles of functional equivalence. It was also one of the first translation projects among indigenous languages of Canada to have the entire translation done by native speakers of the language, with the assignment of four Inuit ministers as translators. The role of the non-native clergy and the Bible Society became that of facilitation and support. This practice has helped ensure broad community support for the project among the Inuit, and has produced a translation that communicates the message in more natural Inuktitut than would have been the case had the work been done by second language speakers of Inuktitut.

Retain the content, adapt the form

The theory of translation developed by Nida and his colleagues presents translation as the clear and accurate communication of the content of a message originating in the source

language, using the natural form of the receptor language. While recognizing the fact that language is a form-meaning composite, "in describing the message, it is essential to distinguish two important elements: (1) the form and (2) the content."[8] The goal in translation according to Nida's theory is to retain the content of a message while adapting the form to what is most natural and appropriate in the receptor language.

The source texts of the biblical message are the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek manuscripts. Since the original manuscripts are not available and the extant copies display some variants, the Bible Societies have chosen to use as their sources the best critical texts available today. Most Canadian indigenous translators do not handle the original languages, so it is necessary to work through intermediate languages such as English and French. The translators are encouraged to consult as many versions as possible, but the standard approach is to use one of the formal correspondence translations, such as the Revised Standard Version (RSV), as their base. The more recent functional equivalence versions, such as the Good News Translation, are used as models for dealing with formatting features like paragraphing and section breaks and even for resolving exegetical problems.

The new common language models can be extremely useful in clarifying idiomatic expressions and rhetorical features in the source texts and pointing the way to possible solutions for difficult translation issues. For example, in Romans 1.14 Paul says, "I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians." Functional equivalence versions recognize the potential for misinterpreting the metaphor (I am debtor) and for taking the term "Greeks" and "Barbarians" too literally. To guide the readers toward a better understanding of what Paul was really trying to communicate here, newer versions translate the meaning rather than the form of the metaphor. The Good News Translation says, "I have an obligation." To avoid interpreting the reference to "Greeks" and "Barbarians" too narrowly, newer versions make it clear that Paul is encompassing all people with words like "civilized" and "uncivilized." Such models are very helpful to indigenous translators.

Another example of the way newer versions can provide a model for translators is found in Romans 1.28-31, which is all one long sentence in the RSV (in the King James Version, the sentence continues on through verse 32). The Good News Translation breaks this up into three shorter sentences and the Contemporary English version goes even further, with seven short, natural English sentences. Such adjustments not only make it easier for the translators to understand the message of the original but also provide helpful models for adjusting the form in order to effectively communicate the content in a way that readers will understand and find natural in their language.

Capturing the meaning

Another common challenge in translation is the use of abstract nominal forms in the original and in the formal correspondence versions. Most indigenous languages are not able to duplicate nouns such as "salvation." Again, the newer versions provide excellent models for displaying the underlying semantic structure in order to render the meaning

clearly and naturally. So for "salvation" in Romans 1.16, the Good News Translation has "God's power to save." This captures the meaning very well and also provides a model for translators working in indigenous languages.

There are other differences in form between the original languages and Canadian indigenous languages for which no English or French model is of much help. For example, Inuktitut does not have a generic word for "brother," but distinguishes between "older brother" and "younger brother." So when the Gospels refer to Peter and his brother Andrew or James and his brother John, Inuktitut must specify which is the older and which the younger brother. Such decisions may be based on what is known about these individuals through history or tradition. Peter and James are generally taken to be the elder brothers based on their prominent positions in the early church. However, prominence is not always the determining factor and sometimes the broader context gives additional clues to the relationship. In 1 Chronicles 19.15, which speaks of Joab and his brother Abishai, Abishai is taken to be the elder based on the order in which they appear in the genealogical record (2.16), even though Joab turns out to be the more prominent.

The original biblical message was given in a very specific cultural and geographical context, quite different in many respects from that of the indigenous communities in Canada. The Arctic lacks most of the plant and animal species referred to in the Bible. There are few trees and no camels or sheep, so Inuktitut lacks natural terms for these items. The two most common strategies for dealing with such challenges are to import borrowed terms or use more generic terms. Often both strategies are used simultaneously, so a camel may become "an animal (generic) called camel (borrowed)" and a palm may be "a tree (generic) called palm (borrowed)." Much more rarely, and only when other solutions are not possible, cultural substitution may be used. This is only an option when the form is not in focus and the function of the two referents is very similar. So, for example, in certain contexts, "coyote" may be used for "wolf." Cultural substitution is not permitted when the result is an anachronism or an excessive distortion of the original message.

Combining terms to create words

Many of the Canadian Aboriginal languages such as the Algonquian languages and Inuktitut are agglutinative, building words by adding affixes to a root. This feature makes them very adept at generating new words for previously unknown concepts. So "school," which is not a concept known in these cultures before European contact, is expressed in some languages by combining terms for "learn" and "place" to create the word "learning-place." A shepherd in Inuktitut is more literally "one-who-takes-care-of-[sheep]."

Often even the best efforts of the translator still fail to generate a satisfactory solution to the lexical rendering of concepts that are unknown in the receptor culture, and translators must resort to such Reader Helps as illustrations and glossary notes to address the gaps in comprehension. Here again, Nida and his associates provided useful models in the Common Language versions they produced in the late 1960s such as the Spanish

Version Popular, followed almost immediately by the English Good News Translation. Helps such as maps and footnotes were already in common use before this time, but Nida and his colleagues pioneered the extensive use of illustrations, glossary notes, section headings, and explanatory footnotes, which contributed a great deal to better comprehension of biblical texts by contemporary readers. Their models have helped guide other translators, including the Inuktitut translation team, in the appropriate use of similar Reader Helps.

While it is not possible to produce a perfect translation, new theoretical approaches articulated by Nida and his colleagues, and the training of native translators, have opened up new avenues for more effective communication of the content of the biblical record for the Inuit and First Nations in Canada. The application of Nida's theories in contemporary Common Language versions of the Bible in English and French has also provided useful models for indigenous translators who must work from these intermediate versions rather than from the original language texts. The result is that most Bible translations for indigenous communities are now done by native speakers, with organizations like the Canadian Bible Society and its partners providing support in the areas of training, quality assurance, computer technology and publishing.

1. Quoted on the Web site of USC Muslim Students Association Islamic Server at www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/.

2. KAISER Jr., Walter C., "The Future of the Bible in Seminary Education," *Concordia Theological Quarterly. 60* (1996): 253.

3. RAABE, P.R., "Translating for Sound," *The Bible Translator,* Vol. 51 (2000) p. 201.

4. SANNEH, Lamin, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis Books 1989), 214.

5. GRIMES, Barbara F., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics 1996), 44-45.

6. Quoted by Kenn Harper in "Writing in Inuktitut: An Historical Perspective" found on the Web site of the National Library of Canada at: www.nlc-bnc.ca/history/16/h16-7301- f.html

7. NIDA, Eugene A., *Toward o Science of Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1964) and Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1969).

8. NIDA, Eugene A. and William D. REYBURN, *Meaning Across Cultures* (New York: Orbis Books 1981), 6.

Source : *Circuit*, n° 77, 2002, p. 13-15.