

How Close to the Text? Issues of Translation and Performance Dennis Dewey (2013)

Repeatedly this question is raised by newcomers to the art and spiritual discipline of biblical storytelling: "How close must I stay to the text in my performance?" This essay explores the answer to that critical question and some practical advice for biblical storytellers.

Within the Network of Biblical Storytellers, we aim for 95% content accuracy and 75% verbal accuracy. That is, we make a serious effort to stay within the "orbit" of the text. A print text would seem concrete enough. But just as the physical reality all around us is composed of molecules of atoms that are mostly empty space, so the texts are translations of fragments of documents which themselves are removed several times/tellings even generations from the events they relate or recast.

Anyone who knows anything about translation knows that there is no "exact" translation. What one gains in literal accuracy, one may lose in subtle humor, poetic weight, nuanced shading, etc. The text lives in an orbit---a number of possible combinations of words and phrases that say about the same thing. Within that orbit many changes are possible. Take (as perhaps not the best example) John 1.1, which begins *εν αρχε εν ηο λογοσ*.

This is usually translated "In the beginning was the word." Within the orbit might be:

In the beginning the word was.

At the start of it all there was the word.

At the first was the word.

The word was in the beginning.

Of course, with the last translation, while gaining more natural word order for English, one would lose the association with the opening line of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

The meaning at the center of the phrase, statement, paragraph, or pericope exerts a gravitational pull on the adaptation.

Storytellers are not translators, but adaptors. Their treatment of the text may be close (word-for-word) or free (paraphrase), but they, too, are held by the gravitational pull of the text. They are not free to change the story willy-nilly if they still plan to identify it as the biblical text. My usual advice to biblical storytellers is that they consider the context/setting/purpose of their performance. If they are telling in place of a reading in public worship, then they need to strive for verbal accuracy, to stay close in the orbit of the text. If they are telling as entertainment about the campfire, then they have a bit more range. Fanciful excurses away from the text and into another story all together---clearly outside the orbit of the text---ought be identified as the teller's version of a biblical story, and not as the story itself. I include in this category the "contemporization" of biblical stories, e.g. when the Good Samaritan becomes "A man was going down from New York to Philadelphia and he got mugged by some street thugs who stripped him and beat him and left him half dead."

Adam Bartholomew (in an email to the Board of the Network of Biblical Storytellers dated January 17, 2000) has written:

I believe it is important to begin educating people about translations and disabusing them of the idea that there is one translation that is the "best." That is at best an understandable enchantment on the part of a translator with his or her own work and at worst a common advertizing gimmick. There is not even one "best" oral translation. A teller needs to know well a given translation, to have studied other translations, and to understand the nature of translations in relation to the text in the original language. Such a teller, in actual performance, will vary the translation according to how the story feels and who the listeners are and how they are responding. There are "better" and "worse" translations. But that judgment is always related to context. In our case, one context is the storytelling context. Another is who our audience is and how we might best communicate with them, or how they are responding to our story.

On a general level it is helpful to distinguish between "formal correspondence" and "dynamic correspondence" translations. The former TEND to stay as close to the word order and grammatical construction as the English of the translators and their projected audiences will allow. The latter recast the grammar and word order in what the translators judge to be the normal language of their readers (sic). **THIS DISTINCTION HAS TO DO PRIMARILY WITH STYLE, NOT WITH THE PARTICULAR TRANSLATION CHOSEN FOR A GIVEN WORD OR PHRASE.**

Translations may be located on a spectrum between the extremes of these two methods. The King James is at the "formal" end of the spectrum. The Good News Bible is probably at the "dynamic" end. Translations like the Jerusalem Bible and New English and their offspring are not far from the "dynamic" end. The RSV, NRSV, and NIV are "formal" translations, but

move towards "dynamic" when the translators feel it necessary. It is ironic that at the very time "dynamic" translations came into vogue among publishers, the scholarly world was beginning to appreciate the artistry of biblical style and rhetoric, which results in the most formal translations of the original texts tolerable. I find an oral storyteller that in oral speech I can get away with even more radically formal correspondence translations than work in print. This is especially the case when the Hebrew or Greek is full of freestanding words or broken sentences. Because we can imitate these so effectively in speaking but not in print, this broken style seems to me to point to oral origin or style of these texts.

Dynamic correspondence translation sometimes tempts the translator to paraphrase. A dramatic example of this is what the Good News Bible (TEV) did with Luke 6:38. In the RSV it reads:

good measure, (Greek: a measure (pause) good! - a "dynamic" move in the RSV?)

pressed down,
shaken together,
running over,
will be put into your lap.

The TEV has:

you will receive a full measure, (note the position of the verb: a "dynamic" move)
a generous helping, (simply synonymous with "full measure")
poured into your hands (Gingrich and Danker's Shorter Lexicon says kolpon means:
"bosom," "breast," "chest," or "the fold of a garment" formed as it falls from the
chest over the girdle [sic], used as a pocket)
--all that you can hold.

There is lots to be said here. The chief thing is that Jesus is using a metaphor from the grain market, where a person (a woman?), instead of using a sack of some kind, holds out part of her robe for grain merchant to pour the grain into. The TEV committee presumably thought, no doubt correctly, that their readers would not know what on earth Jesus is talking about. They also wanted to say something that was clear and close to what Jesus was saying. So they simply abandoned the metaphor.

In actuality, the last phrase of the translation is quite inaccurate. The RSV translation accurately gives a progression of a "measure" (of grain) from "good," to "pressed down" (eliminating air spaces and getting more in), "shaken together" (same effect as pressing down, done a second time just to be sure), and then "running over"! This is not "all that you can hold." It is MORE than you can hold!

Well, that is a start on the matter. Perhaps we can write up a booklet to help orient people to the problem. Meanwhile, I would recommend we encourage people to use a formal correspondence translation, such as the RSV, NRSV, or NIV. But make it clear that there is not "best" translation. They should be aware of the variety of possibilities offered by various translations. And if possible, they should take my variety workshop on "Will the real translation please stand up"!

David Rhoads writes in his article, "Performing the Gospel of Mark":

The experience of assuming the role of the narrator and actually telling the story is different from the experience of reading or hearing the Gospel. The demands of performance impress upon one the need too make choices about the meaning and rhetoric of the story that a reader or a hearer of the Gospel

might not make. For this reason, I find it helpful to make my own translations for performance. Translations are not often made with the idea of storytelling in mind. Translations have been made primarily to convey meaning to a reading audience. Few translations have taken into consideration the oral impact of the rhetoric on an audience. THE EXPERIENCE OF TELLING THE STORY ASSISTS IN THIS VERY PROCESS OF TRANSLATION, BECAUSE I OFTEN CHANGE AND ADJUST THE TRANSLATION IN LIGHT OF THE EXPERIENCE OF PERFORMANCE. (p. 109)*

Biblical Storyteller Dennis Dewey, as well as many if not all of us, can bear witness the same experience. A few years ago Dennis was looking for a good translation of HETAIRE in Mt 20:13, often translated "friend." It just DIDN'T FEEL RIGHT when he was actually telling the story. He landed on the translation "buddy."

It is helpful to study Greek and Hebrew, and desirable to have someone who is good in those languages to consult with when you don't know it. But not knowing these languages does not bar a person from entering the struggle and making judgments like David and Dennis made.

One approach is to consult a variety of translations of the word or phrase you are struggling with. That can give you a fair idea of the range of possibilities, of the English word field from which translators are drawing. Most dictionaries give several synonyms when translating any given word or phrase. Those synonyms rarely exhaust the possibilities. They are rather suggestive of the field of meaning shared by yet other English words and phrases. And one of the most important principles for selection of a given English word or expression is a deep knowledge of the immediate context. If an important part of the CONTEXT is the act of communicating the story, tellers need to be aware of the range of freedom they have to offer their own translation, or at a given point to draw from another published translation.

In order to be close to the STYLE of the original - an area not as accessible to people who cannot actually read Greek or Hebrew, although informed use of an interlinear can be a big help - we should counsel people to start with the RSV, NRSV, or NIV or other formal correspondence translation. But these translations need adaptation. As time goes along, people who are competent translators can, of course, offer translations that are more suited for oral storytelling than what is presently available. But even these translations will be a starting point, open to changes that suggest themselves in the act of actually telling the story.

One final note: the work of translation will never be completed. Even a teller very competent in Hebrew or Greek will be continually stumbling upon new translations as he or she tells a given story to one new audience after another.

*David Rhoads, "Performing the Gospel of Mark" in BODY AND BIBLE, Bjoern Krondorfer, ed. TPI, 1992, p. 102-119. Another good piece on this topic is Everett Fox's introduction to his translation of the Torah.