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Aspects of "Cultural Literacy" Relevant to Bible Translation

Ernst-August Gutt

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Abstract

In 1987 E.D. Hirsch published his bestseller "Cultural literacy: What Every American needs to know." The education system of the time seriously underestimated the importance of background knowledge needed to successfully function in literate American society. Drawing on two decades of experimental research, Hirsch showed that without the background information needed for a given text, readers are effectively illiterate with regard to that text. He argued that quantitatively, too, background knowledge plays a major role in comprehension: the information explicitly stated in any text is only "the tip of the iceberg" of the intended meaning, the bulk needs to be supplied by the reader. In the light of this, Hirsch argued that one of the central goals of the educational system must be to provide American children with an adequate body of knowledge that would enable them to understand all communications addressed to the general public. This body of knowledge he called "cultural literacy."

Based on three decades of experience in Bible translation, the author of this paper sees some striking parallels with regard to the dominant philosophy in Bible translation. While the provision of biblical background knowledge has been given more attention in some quarters in recent years, it is still far from being acknowledged and treated as a key factor in the planning and execution of Bible translation projects, essential to ensure optimal efficiency of the work and to maximise the impact of the products.

Applying relevant insights gained by Hirsch, the author examines the extent and nature of biblical literacy, that is, the background knowledge, needed for the successful comprehension of a sample text (Lk 10:13–14) . This is done with the help of conceptual tools provided by relevance theory, the currently most developed theory of inferential communication. It goes on to the task of systematically identifying mismatches in background knowledge between original and receptor audience. It draws attention to the importance of timing and processing effort in biblical literacy strategies designed to overcome such mismatches. One of the spin-offs of biblical literacy is the need for closer interdisciplinary cooperation between biblical studies, anthropology and translation.

1. Introduction

In 1987 E. D. Hirsch published his book "Cultural Literacy: What every American should know," calling for a significant reform of the American education system. His book had a strong impact; indeed, it was the first of a series of national bestsellers by the author.

Hirsch's book was based on results from psychological and other research which showed that adequate *background knowledge* is an essential condition for successful communication. Applying this to the cultural diversity of America, he argued that one of the key tasks of the education system is to provide all Americans with a sufficient amount of common background knowledge so that they can function successfully as a nation. This background knowledge shared across all sectors of American society Hirsch calls "cultural literacy."[1]

Having worked in Bible translation for about three decades, it seems to me that, like education, Bible translation, too, could greatly benefit from the insights into meaning and communication highlighted by Hirsch. Similar to the educators of Hirsch's day, Bible translators have also tended to significantly underestimate the amount and importance of background knowledge needed for adequate comprehension, often resulting in a lack of impact of translated Scripture.

Over the last decade or so, there have been some very encouraging indications that this situation is beginning to change. The importance of providing background information is increasingly being recognised and new ways are being sought of providing more background material to the audience.

This paper aims to strengthen these developments by trying to show how recent developments in pragmatics can help to identify systematically and with considerable explicitness what information is needed for adequate "cultural literacy" with regard to specific biblical texts. It also argues that, as a rule, any Bible translation project needs to be complemented by a carefully planned programme designed to establish the "biblical literacy" necessary for the Scripture translations to have a satisfactory impact.

2. Lack of background knowledge makes illiterate

2.1 Changed view of comprehension

The research on which Hirsch's insights are based, "produced an array of information which is unparalleled in its understanding of the underlying processes in the comprehension of language," as Robert Glaser, president of the National Academy of Education of the US in 1985, put it (Glaser 1985:viii, as quoted by Hirsch 1987:33). Hirsch wrote that

> research has shown that reading doesn't follow an orderly pattern, as used to be thought. We don't first identify words, then word meanings, next combine word meanings to get the meanings of sentences, and finally combine sentence meanings to get the meaning of a whole text. This model isn't wrong in all respects, but we know that it is so oversimplified and incomplete that it presents *a highly misleading picture of the way we understand texts*. (Hirsch 1987:33, italics my own)

He continued:

> The new picture that is emerging from language research…brings to the fore the highly active mind of the reader, who is now discovered to be not only a decoder of what is written down but also *a supplier of much essential information that is not written down*. The reader's mind is constantly inferring meanings that are not directly stated by the words of a text but are nonetheless part of its essential content. (33; italics my own)

This view has become known as the "constructive hypothesis of meaning," and been corroborated by considerable experimental research. One of the experiments mentioned by Hirsch is a sentence recognition

[1] Hirsch then focused on working out a "core knowledge curriculum," that should be common to all American schools. The idea of imposing such a nationwide curriculum, the amount and selection of particular information have led to considerable criticism. However, the basic insight that comprehension strongly depends on appropriate background knowledge has not been seriously challenged.

test, carried out by Bransford and his colleagues (Bransford and Johnson 1972). Three groups of test persons were exposed to the following text:

> The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange the items in different groups. Of course one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step; otherwise you are pretty well set. (Hirsch 1987:40)

For group 1, the text was given under the heading "Washing clothes"; for group 2, this heading was supplied *after* they had read the text. Group 3 was not given the heading at all.

Then a sentence recognition test was carried out: presented with a list of sentences, the test subjects were required to pick out those that had been part of the test passage. The striking result was that only subjects of group 1, the group that had been given the heading *before* reading the text, were able to recognize sentences from that text.

The explanation of this result by the experimenters is that "the title enabled [the subjects of group 1] to integrate the sentences into a mental model that they constructed from prior knowledge about washing clothes. This model gave the sentences meaning…" (Hirsch 1987:40)—and it was on the basis of that remembered meaning that they were able to recognise sentences from the passage.

Hirsch concluded:

> Persons who lack cultural knowledge are in just the position of the subjects who were given the clothes-washing passage without benefit of a title to form a context for the sentences. Informationally deprived people constantly run across passages that look like the Bransford one, because the texts contain important referential clues they can't understand. *Although they can read the individual sentences, they can't make sense out of the whole*. (1987:40; italics my own)

As Hirsch put it, this lack of background knowledge leaves such people, in effect, in a state of *illiteracy*:

> Any reader who does not possess the knowledge assumed in a piece he or she reads *will in fact be illiterate with respect to that particular piece of writing.* (1987:13; italics my own)

Hirsch illustrated such "cultural illiteracy" with an everyday-example taken from the *Washington Post*:

> A federal appeals panel today upheld an order barring foreclosure on a Missouri farm, saying that US Agriculture Secretary John R. Block has reneged on his responsibilities to some debt-ridden farmers. The appeals panel directed the USDA to create a system of processing loan deferments and of publicising them as it said Congress had intended. The panel said that it is the responsibility of the agriculture secretary to carry out this intent "not as a private banker, but as a public broker." (Hirsch 1987:13)

Contemplating what would happen to readers "who are well trained in…coding skills but are culturally illiterate," he wrote:

> They might know words like *foreclosure*, but they would not understand what the piece means. Who gave the order that the federal panel upheld? What is a federal appeals panel? Where is Missouri, and what about Missouri is relevant to the issue? Why are many farmers debt ridden? What is the USDA? What is a public broker? (Hirsch 1987:13)

He concluded:

> Even if culturally illiterate readers bothered to look up individual words, they would have little idea of the reality being referred to. *The explicit words are just surface pointers to textual meaning in reading and writing. The comprehending reader must bring to the text the appropriate background information.* (Hirsch 1987:13–14; italics my own)

2.2 The words are only the "tip of the iceberg" of meaning

Regarding the amount of background information needed for understanding a text, Hirsch pointed out that it is often much more than the information actually expressed: "To grasp the words on a page we have to know *a lot of information that isn't set down on the page*" (1987:3; italics my own). Just considering the amount of information it would take to answer all the questions raised by that short newspaper article

makes this clear. To illustrate this proportional relation graphically, Hirsch used the tip-of-the-iceberg metaphor:

> The explicit meanings of a piece of writing are the tip of an iceberg of meaning: the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader's own relevant knowledge. (Hirsch 1987:33–34)

As is well-known, only 1/7 or less of an iceberg appears above the surface of the water; 85 % or more of its mass lies below the surface. Without attaching too much importance to numerical values here, this is a very different picture from that often conveyed in the literature on translation, where one gets the impression that implicit information consists of comparatively small bits and pieces of information, left out by the communicator for reasons of redundancy or convenience.

Another interesting parallel is that while the naked eye may penetrate a little below the surface of the water, the bulk of the iceberg is hidden from view. Similarly with the investigation of implicit meaning: the bulk of the interpretive processes of the mind are below the level of consciousness and not open to introspection.

A last parallel: to get the full measure of the hidden part of an iceberg, one needs sophisticated scientific equipment, such as sonar or infrared instruments. In an analogous way, investigating the implicit information of a text requires the help of sophisticated conceptual tools, such as have been developed by Sperber and Wilson in the relevance theory of communication (1995).

The following biblical example is intended to demonstrate the appropriateness of the tip-of-the-iceberg analogy as well as the usefulness of relevance-theoretic tools for an explicit and detailed meaning analysis of texts.[2]

3. A biblical example

> How terrible it will be for you, Chorazin! How terrible for you too, Bethsaida! If the miracles which were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, the people there would have long ago sat down, put on sackcloth, and sprinkled ashes on themselves, to show that they had turned from their sins! 14 God will show more mercy on the Judgment Day to Tyre and Sidon than to you. (Lk 10:13-14; TEV)

If this short passage, consisting of only two verses, were presented to a "biblically illiterate" person, it would give rise to quite a number of questions – like the excerpt from the Washington Post article: What are Chorazin and Bethsaida? What will be terrible to them? What are Tyre and Sidon? What have these four to do with each other? What miracles are being talked about? Who did them? When? What have miracles to do with turning from sins? Why would one use sackcloth and ashes to show turning from sin? What is the Judgment Day? Why is Jesus saying all this? etc. (It may be worth noting that these question arise from a "dynamic equivalence" translation, not a "formal equivalence" one.)

The answers to all these questions are not found in the text itself, the surface part of the iceberg, but need to be figured out by the audience using background information available to them. Without that information, a "biblically illiterate" person is unable to construct a coherent meaning for this text and remains puzzled.

Note that there is a significant difference here to the "clothes washing" text mentioned earlier: with the clothes washing text, the readers actually had the necessary mental model in their minds; all they lacked was the right clue to access it, and a 2-word heading was enough to achieve that. In the "cultural illiteracy" cases, both that of the *Washington Post* and the passage from Luke, the problem is not just a *clue* that is missing, but *the mental model itself*.

3.1 The nature and extent of biblical background information

Before investigating the passage in Luke 10 more closely, two points need to stressed. Firstly, in the space given, only a few selected aspects can be dealt with in any detail. Much more would need to be said in an

[2] Other applications of relevance theory to biblical exegesis are found in the following: Gutt 1986; Hill 2002; Pattemore 2000 and 2004.

analysis striving to be comprehensive. Secondly, the analysis will be concerned only with information for which there is reason to believe that it was part of the intended interpretation, or, put in relevance-theoretic terms, only explicatures and implicatures and the accompanying cognitive effects will be investigated. Further inferences that an interested reader may want to explore will not be covered. (For the purpose of this study the RSV-translation has been chosen as a closer representation of the original.)

> 13 Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. 14 But it shall be more tolerable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. (Lk 10:13-14; RSV)

According to current insights into how inferential communication works, what meaning would this passage have been intended to communicate?[3]

The starting points for the interpretation of these verses would be the following: 1) what has just been communicated before (*initial context*); 2) the concepts evoked by the text (*stimulus*), 3) which then make accessible the encyclopaedic entries of those concepts, containing further background knowledge (*extended context*). (The information in the encyclopaedic entries in turn contains concepts, which in turn can have encyclopaedic information associated with them and so forth.)

The crucial point is that all this information is *ordered* in terms of degrees of *accessibility*: the initial context is the most accessible information, followed by the encyclopaedic information directly associated with the concepts in the stimulus; any further extensions of the context, e.g. via concepts in those encyclopaedic entries are less accessible, and incur extra processing cost and so forth.

The following diagram (Figure 1) attempts to illustrate this for the sample passage. In the space given, this study will focus on the background information accessed by the name of one of the towns mentioned, Chorazin, and by the expression "mighty works" (Greek *dunameis)*.

Contextual information re "Chorazin" in Lk 10:13
(Selected aspects only)

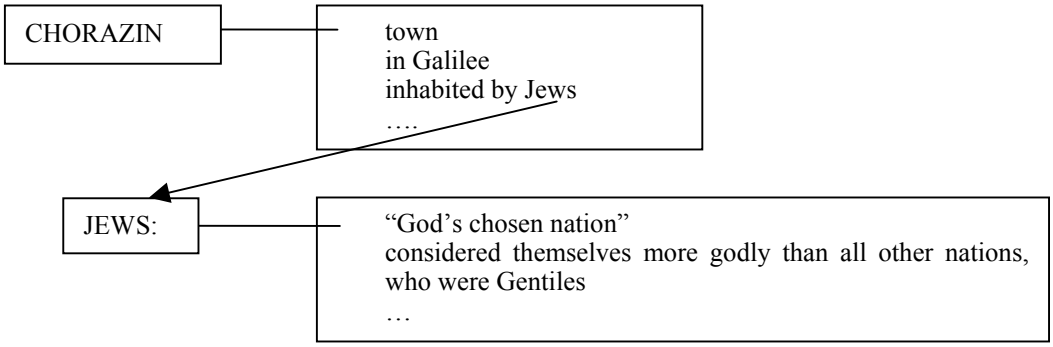

Figure 1

The word *Chorazin* in the text would access the *concept* CHORAZIN in the reader's mind.[4] This concept would have an encyclopaedic entry containing everything that a person would know about the place. It seems reasonable, that, among many other things, this information would include the knowledge that this town was situated in Galilee and predominantly inhabited by Jews.

The concept "JEWS" in turn would have its own encyclopaedic entry, making accessible further information, including that shown in the diagram: that the Jews were unique in the world as "God's chosen nation," that they therefore often considered themselves superior to all other nations, plus quite a number of related beliefs.

[3] We are looking here at the last communicator involved: Luke, as the writer of the Gospel.
[4] Concepts are printed in capital letters, to distinguish them from words.

Two caveats are in order here. As already mentioned, the encyclopaedic entries would probably contain many other pieces of information, and much of it would vary from individual to individual. However, assuming Luke was writing for a wider audience, he would rely only on information likely to be *shared* across that audience, rather than idiosyncratic bits and pieces, like perhaps that Rabbi So-and-so had an aunt living in Chorazin.

Secondly, according to the relevance theory of communication, out of all the information available, the audience would be expected to consider only those pieces that fulfilled two conditions simultaneously: that they would be accessible without unnecessary processing effort *and* that they would lead to adequate cognitive effects. Only pieces of information fulfilling *both* of these conditions would be considered part of the intended interpretation. They would be one kind of implicature: *implicated premises*.

3.2 Miracles and repentance: illustration of context selection

The second half of v. 13 provides a good illustration of how the search for relevance leads to the recovery of implicated premises. It reads: "…for if the mighty works done in you [Chorazin and Bethsaida] had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented." By using the "if…then" construction, Luke clearly expects his readers to see a logical relation between miracles and repentance— but what exactly is that relation? A biblically illiterate person might well be puzzled.

In inferential communication, the expression "if–then" provides a *procedural instruction,* telling the audience to construct a logical argument where the proposition marked by "if" acts as a premise and the proposition marked by "then" as a conclusion. In this case, the following parts of that argument are already clear:*5*

> Premise 1: if the mighty works done in [Chorazin] had been done in Tyre and Sidon (*explicature)*
> Premise 2: ???
> Premise … ???
> ---
> Conclusion: [the people of Tyre and Sidon] would have repented *(explicature)*

However, these elements alone do not make a conclusive argument – the conclusion is not entailed by the premise expressed. Other premises need to be supplied to make it a valid argument. What could these be? Again, they would have to be drawn from a highly accessible source, and the encyclopaedic entry of the concept "MIGHTY WORKS" (Greek *dunameis*) would be a prime candidate. It would contain the well-known fact that miracles were one part of Jesus' ministry (see diagram), which crucially also involved another activity: the preaching of repentance: "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand!" (cf. Mt 4:17, Mk 1:15, Lk 4:43 etc.).

Display of contextual information re "mighty deeds (*dunameis*)" in Lk 10:13
(Selected aspects only)

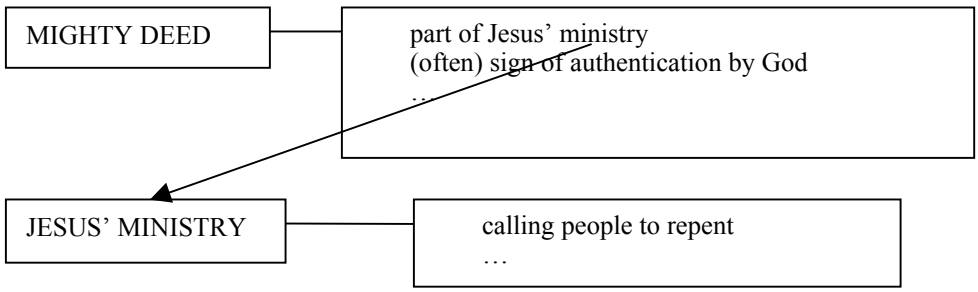

Figure 2

Using this information as another premise in the argument, one gets the following structure:

[5] Though English sentences are used in these arguments, they are intended to stand in for complete propositions, derived from them in the interpretation process. See Sperber and Wilson 1995, ch. 4.

Premise 1: if the mighty works done in [Chorazin] had been done in Tyre and Sidon (*explicature*)
Premise 2: Jesus had preached repentance (*implicated premise*)
Premise … ???

Conclusion: [the people of Tyre and Sidon] would have repented

This still would not be a complete argument, and without having completed the argument in their minds, the audience would not really have understood the text in the intended way. Yet, as already indicated in Figure 2, another piece of information in the encyclopaedic entry of MIGHTY WORKS (*dunameis*) would be that miracles often were proof of the divine authentication of someone's ministry, especially of prophets, allowing the following further development of the argument:

Premise 1: if the mighty works done in [Chorazin] had been done in Tyre and Sidon (*explicature*)
Premise 2: Jesus had preached repentance. (*implicated premise*)
Premise 3: Miracles are a divine authentication of someone's preaching. (*implicated premise*)
Premise … ???

Conclusion: [the people of Tyre and Sidon] would have repented (*explicature*)

Premises 1–3 taken together would imply: "Jesus' preaching of repentance in Chorazin was shown to be divinely authenticated." This thought, an *implicated conclusion* following from premises 1-3, could then be used as a premise to make the overall argument (reasonably) complete:

Premise 1: if the mighty works done in [Chorazin] had been done in Tyre and Sidon (*explicature*)
Premise 2: Jesus had preached repentance (*implicated premise*)
Premise 3: Miracles were a divine authentication of someone's preaching. (*implicated premise*)
Premise 4: Jesus' preaching of repentance in Chorazin had been divinely authenticated. (implicated conclusion, from premises 1,2, and 3). (*implicated conclusion*)

Conclusion: [the people of Tyre and Sidon] would have repented (*explicature)*

Paraphrased more freely, the fuller meaning of v.13b could be expressed like this:

> "If the people of Tyre and Sidon had received the call to repentance which Jesus gave in Chorazin and which was clearly authenticated by miracles, they would have repented."

This, then, shows how procedural semantic markers ("if…then") can trigger the search for quite specific pieces of contextual information, and the fact that the communicator deliberately used these markers makes the information accessed implicated premises, that is, pieces of information endorsed by the communicator. Note that these arguments can be recursive in structure: an implicated conclusion following from a subset of premises can serve as an implicated premise in a larger set of arguments.

3.3 The relevance of Tyre and Sidon

Having come this far, a fairly obvious question would be: why did Jesus talk here about what the people of Tyre and Sidon would have done? What was the point of bringing up this case, which was not only hypothetical but counterfactual, here?

Intuitively one feels that Jesus mentioned Tyre and Sidon for the sake of contrast with Chorazin and Bethsaida; more specifically, the contrast seems to be that while Tyre and Sidon would have repented, Chorazin and Bethsaida did not repent. Matthew states this fact explicitly in his account of this incident (Mt 11:20), but Luke does not. This means that Luke expected his readers to supply this information, but how?

The simplest possibility is that Luke knew they were already familiar with these events. After all, in the prologue to his Gospel Luke makes quite clear a) that when he wrote his Gospel there were already many accounts of Jesus' ministry, and b) that he was aware that the information he gave was not altogether new to his reader(s), but that he was writing about "… things of which you have been informed" (Lk 1:4; RSV). Indeed, Luke's declared main purpose was to increase the *certainty* of what Theophilus (and other readers)

already knew. Hence Luke may well have had readers in mind who knew that the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida had failed to repent at Jesus' preaching.[6]

However, even if readers had not known this particular information, it would not have been very difficult for them to infer it from the clues given, utilising more general background information available to them. Thus the word *ouai* "alas" itself would have provided a fairly clear clue; as Howard Marshall points out, this exclamation frequently occurs in the Old Testament as "an expression of pity for those who stand under divine judgment" and Luke could well have expected his audience to be aware of this, again via the encyclopaedic entry associated with this word (Marshall 1978:255). [7] Furthermore, one well-known reason for divine judgment was people's failure to repent. All this together would have yielded the following logical argument:

PART I

Premise 1: *ouai* was used to lament people under divine judgment. (*implicated premise*)
Premise 2: The people of Chorazin were under divine judgment. (*implicated premise*)

Conclusion: Jesus lamented the people of Chorazin with the exclamation *ouai. (explicature)*
Free paraphrase: "Jesus lamented the people of Chorazin because they were under divine judgment."

PART II

Premise 1: People who fail to repent stand under divine judgment. (*implicated premise*)
Premise 2: The people of Chorazin failed to repent. (*implicated premise*)

Conclusion: The people of Chorazin were under divine judgment. (*implicated conclusion)*
Free paraphrase: "The people of Chorazin were under divine judgment because they failed to repent."

Thus, the proposition that the people of Chorazin did not repent would be communicated as one of the *implicated premises* of a complex argument.

But even having come this far, the relevance of bringing out that the people of Tyre would have repented when the people of Chorazin did not would still be unclear. Here encyclopaedic information activated by the reference to "Tyre and Sidon" comes into play. [8]

As indicated in the diagram (Figure 3) , the encyclopaedic entries of TYRE and SIDON would have included the well-known fact that the people living there were not only Gentiles, but also that they were repeatedly singled out in the Scriptures for their wickedness (cf. Am. 1:9f.; Is. 23:1-18; Jer. 25:22; 47:4; Ezk. 26-28). By asserting that these Gentiles, notorious for their great wickedness, would have repented when the people of Chorazin had not (implicated premise – see above), Jesus implied, in effect, that the people of Chorazin were very wicked indeed:

[6] In relevance-theoretic terms, this would mean that one of Luke's primary purposes in writing this Gospel was the strengthening of existing contextual assumptions, which is one of three basic cognitive effects that make for relevance.
[7] "οὐαί means 'alas for', and introduces an expression of pity for those who stand under divine judgment. The 'woe' form is to be found in the OT (Is. 1:4f.; 5:8-23; 10:5ff.; 33:1; Am. 5:18; 6:1; Hab. 2:6ff.; E. Jenni, THAT I, 474-477)" Marshall 1978: 255.
[8] Since due to time restrictions, we can address only a few selected issues, we shall deal with Tyre and Sidon together, as one expression. This seems legitimate since Tyre and Sidon were often named together in the Old Testament, as places notorious for their wickedness and the severe divine punishment in store for them. They are treated as a pair in some OT passages: cf. Joel 3:2, Zech. 9:4.

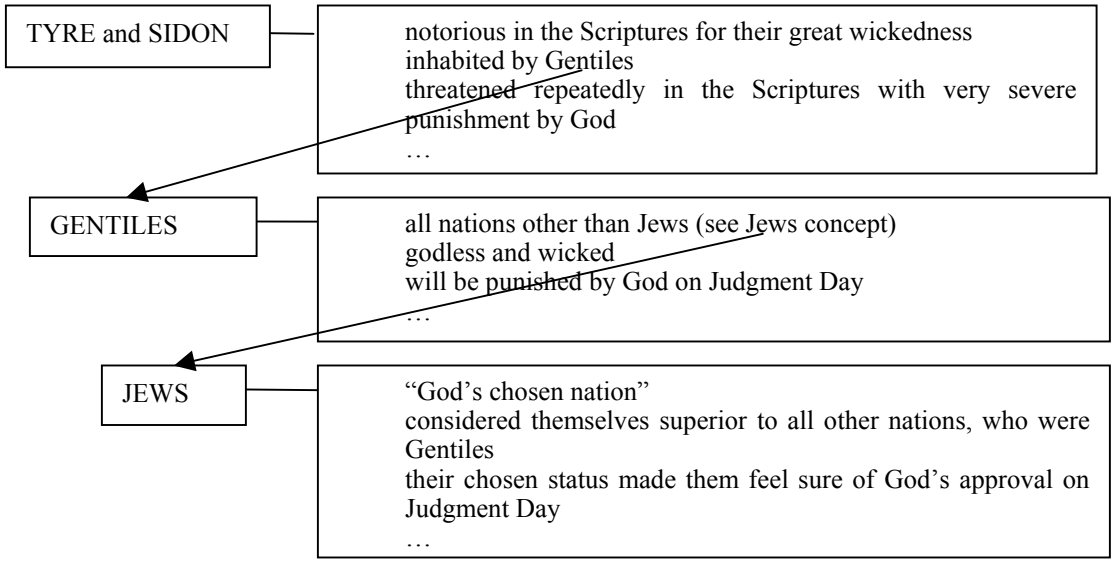

Figure 3

Premise 1: The people of Tyre and Sidon would have repented at Jesus' call. (*explicature)*
Premise 2: The people of Tyre and Sidon were very wicked. (*implicated premise)*
Premise 3: The people of Chorazin did not repent at Jesus' call. (*implicated premise – see above*)
Premise 4: People who do not repent are more wicked than those who do.

Conclusion: The people of Chorazin are extremely wicked. (*implicated conclusion*)

This implicature would have been highly offensive – not just to the people of Chorazin, but to Jews of that time in general: it was fundamental to their worldview that they were godly, certainly when compared to Gentiles. Thus Luke presents Jesus not only chiding the people of Chorazin, but negating one of the most fundamental beliefs common among the Jews of his time.

Premise 1: The people of Chorazin are more wicked than those of Tyre. (*implicated premise - see above)*
Premise 2: The people of Chorazin are Jews.
Premise 2: The people of Tyre and Sidon are Gentiles.
conclusion 1 above)

Conclusion 2: (Some) Jews are more wicked than (some) Gentiles.

Yet, this was not all: worse was to come. In v. 14 Jesus is presented as negating another common, fundamental belief tied to the Jew-Gentile distinction: that the Gentiles would be punished harshly by God whereas the Jews would go free. As Edersheim points out, "according to the common notion of the time, the vials of wrath were to be poured out only on the Gentiles"; by contrast, Jews, "as Abraham's children, were sure of escape – in the words of the Talmud, that 'the night' (Is. xxi.12) was 'only to the nations of the world, but the morning to Israel'" (Edersheim 1971: 271). Accordingly, both pairs of assumptions are contained in the diagram, in the encyclopaedic entries of the concepts JEWS and GENTILES respectively.

Premise 1: God will punish the people of Chorazin on Judgment Day. (*implicated premise of explicature: only people liable to punishment require mercy*)
Premise 2: The people of Chorazin are Jews. (premise 4 from previous argument)

Conclusion 1: God will punish (at least some) Jews on Judgment Day.

This implicated conclusion would contradict the fundamental belief that Jews would go free on Judgment Day. But even this would not be all: Jesus was going to negate yet another cherished belief of his Jewish contemporaries – that as God's chosen nation they could be sure of his special favour and consideration:

Premise 1: God will show more mercy on Judgment Day to the people of Tyre and Sidon than to the people of Chorazin.
Premise 2: The people of Chorazin are Jews.
Premise 3: The people of Tyre are Gentiles.

Conclusion: God will show more mercy on Judgment Day to (some) Gentiles than to (some) Jews.

This analysis shows that the contrast with Tyre and Sidon was not just mildly relevant, but that it achieved strong cognitive effects: its implicatures were designed to delete contextual assumptions of the audience. (Note that Luke opens v. 14 with the discourse marker *pleen* 'but', a procedural marker instructing the reader to look for the denial of contextual assumptions.) Since these contextual assumptions were not just marginal but central to Jewish society at the time, Jesus' statements would have come across as revolutionary.

3.4 Summary of background information

This analysis of the implicated information and cognitive effects is still far from complete. For example, neither the procedural marker *for,* nor the expressions *long ago* or *sitting in sackcloth and ashes* (v. 13) have been dealt with. Yet the following summary of even this partial meaning analysis demonstrates that the meaning intended to be inferred goes far beyond the information verbally expressed:

Major Implicatures

1. The people of Chorazin had not repented at Jesus' preaching.
2. The people of Chorazin were more godless than those of Tyre and Sidon.
3. Jews expected to be approved by God on Judgment Day.
4. The people of Chorazin expected to be approved by God on Judgment Day.
5. The people of Chorazin will be punished on Judgment Day.
6. (At least some) Jews will be punished on Judgment Day.
7. God will show more mercy to the people of Tyre and Sidon than to those of Chorazin.
8. God will show more mercy to (at least some) Gentiles than to (at least some) Jews.

Strengthening

1. The inhabitants of Tyre will be punished on Judgment Day.

Deletion

~~1. Jews are more godly than Gentiles.~~

~~2. The people of Chorazin are more godly than the people of Tyre.~~

~~3. The people of Chorazin will be approved by God on Judgment Day.~~

~~4. God will favour Jews on Judgment Day.~~

While none of this information is stated in the text itself, without it the audience would remain illiterate with regard to this passage.

3.5 Identifying mismatches in background knowledge

To get a clearer impression of the mismatches in background knowledge between the original audience and the readers of the translation, translators could use a chart like the following. The first column would contain the intended contextual information of the original, with the second column providing space for filling any background information the typical reader of the translation would be likely to access.

Information required for comprehension		**Information accessible to receptors**	
Concepts	***Contextual assumptions***	***Concepts***	***Contextual assumptions***
woe:	EE: Used in Scripture (OT) by prophets as cry of woe in the face of prophetic pronouncement of *God's judgment*	**?**	**?**
Chorazin	EE: town inhabited by *Jews*	**?**	**?**
Bethsaida	EE: town inhabited by *Jews*;	**?**	**?**
Jews	EE: special status as God's chosen people; considered themselves godly; contrasted themselves with all other nations who were *Gentiles.*	**?**	**?**
Gentiles	seen as sinful and under *God's judgment*	**?**	**?**
Miracles	EE: performed by Jesus as part of *Jesus' Ministry*; divine authentication of ministry	**?**	**?**
Jesus' ministry	Included the call to *repentance*	**?**	**?**
Tyre and Sidon:	EE: cities in Phoenicia inhabited by Gentiles; notorious from Scripture (OT) for their wickedness and therefore for severe punishment by God.	**?**	**?**
sitting in sackcloth and ashes:	EE: familiar symbolic actions of repentance and grief. In the Scripture (OT), the people of Niniveh, a Gentile city are reported to have put on sackcloth indicating their repentance at the preaching of the prophet Jonah.	**?**	**?**
Judgment Day	EE: God will give terrible punishment to Gentiles. God will acquit Jews.	**?**	**?**

Key: EE = encyclopaedic entry

3.6 The need for contrastive cultural study

As should be obvious, the comparative study of background knowledge logically involves the following three steps:

1. identifying information needed for understanding the intended meaning of the original text;
2. identifying information likely to be accessed by target readers for that particular text;
3. identifying mismatches between the two backgrounds.

Step 1, an explicit meaning analysis of the biblical text, would best be done by biblical scholars. Of course, numerous commentaries and other exegetical materials are already available, and they often provide very helpful information. At the same time, they tend to be a bit uneven in their coverage; on the one hand, they may elaborate on issues and information of wider theological interest, going far beyond the author-intended meaning; on the other hand, much of the author-intended meaning is addressed in intuitive and often vague terms. This is not surprising, considering that comprehension processes take place sub-consciously for the

most part. As already pointed out above, in recent years significant progress has been made in research on inferential communication and provided us with quite powerful conceptual tools for meeting this challenge (cf. e.g. the notions of "procedural semantics," … and "radical underdeterminacy" of linguistic expressions, Carston 2002). The utilisation of these tools in biblical exegesis could lead to more consistent coverage and greater explicitness.

Step 2, the study of the receptor culture, would probably fall on the translator(s) in most cases. As Hill has pointed out, such studies need to proceed "… both on the level of worldview categories, and also on the level of the contextual assumptions evoked by specific biblical texts" (2002:67).[9] General worldview studies would supply information about whether there are concepts in the culture resembling the biblical concepts of "repentance" or "Judgment Day"; studies arising from particular texts might investigate, for example, what notions people would associate with actions like "sitting in sackcloth and ashes."

This implies that Bible translation requires the intensive interaction of biblical studies and anthropology. While both these disciplines have already been involved in Bible translation work for a long time, their interaction has often been very limited. In fact, a much needed cooperation has been hindered by a "perceived irrelevance of anthropology for Bible translation" (Hill 2002:63).

Yet the insights into communication gained over the last couple of decades suggest that close interaction between the two disciplines is necessary to enable Bible translators to recognise and overcome communication problems much more effectively. Thus, one of the spin-offs of engaging in biblical literacy is the strengthening of interdisciplinary cooperation and opening the way for "cultural research [that] is directed and relevant" (Hill 2002:63). A very encouraging development in this direction is the development of the ANQR Resources.[10]

Before leaving the topic of identifying mismatches in background knowledge with regard to particular portions of Scripture, it is worth noting that there is a feedback relation here: the process of comparison may start from a particular selection of biblical texts, but, as the profile of overlaps and differences in cultural knowledge becomes clearer, it may well lead to changes in the selection of texts (or of the sequence in which they are translated), which may lead to further improvements in the contrastive profile, and so forth. So, one should anticipate that the processes of profiling and text selection will proceed in tandem.

4. Devising appropriate means to reach the goals

Once a fairly explicit understanding of the mismatches in background information needed for the successful comprehension of the translated texts has been reached, the next step is to develop a strategy for "biblical literacy" that will bridge this gap effectively.

In the recent history of Bible translation, a variety of different means have been developed and used to provide background information: explication of implicit information, pictures, footnotes, glossaries, introductions to biblical books, and Bible background booklets. Some translators have also produced a "panorama" of the Old Testament, consisting of a "series of selections and abridged portions" to provide background information for the translation of the New Testament (Dye 1985:21). More recently, greater flexibility has developed in the use of Old Testament portions, especially taking into account the needs of predominantly oral people groups, for example, through means like "chronological storying" (Brown 2002). Some Bible translation agencies have used such instruments as study Bibles and the "new media" have opened up new and very exciting avenues.

All these means have proved helpful to varying degrees in various situations. At the same time it seems clear that the fuller and more realistic insights into the complexities of communication and its requirements could greatly enhance the effectiveness of biblical literacy efforts.

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[9] Hill's dissertation (2002) provides many valuable insights and tips on what is involved in such comparative studies. See esp. Chapter 3.

[10] The ANQR Resources are being developed under the guidance of Elinor Abbot, and a preliminary version is included in the anthropology section of the *LinguaLinks* software, developed by SIL International.

For example, in many cases the explication of implicit information has been seen and used as a major tool for providing missing background information. In the following table, back-translations from three idiomatic translations done in the Philippines are placed side by side. Background information overlapping with the meaning analysis given above is marked here by italics:[11]

Tagbanwa	Western Bukidnon Manobo	Yakan
13 Jesus continued speaking, saying, "Alas, really very hard is in store for you who are taga Corazin and taga Betsaida. Because supposing that there in Tiro and Sidon, *whose people are not Judio*, were done all these amazing things which were done here with you, it's true that for a long time now the people from there would have dressed in rough (clothes) and sat in the ash-place, so as to cause it to be recognized that they were truly repenting/sorry. 14 It's true that at the day of judging, much heavier will be the punishment you are sentenced to, heavier that that of the taga Tiro and taga Sidon.	13 And Jesus said again, "Pity you in the future, you inhabitants of Chorazin! Pity you also in the future, you inhabitants of Bethsaida; as for the miracles which *I* caused you to see in your *Jewish* village, if I had done them in the villages of Tyre and Sidon *where the people are not Jewish,* they would have clothed themselves with sacks and they would have put ashes on their heads as a sign that they were abandoning their wicked customs. 14 Don't you forget that in the future, on the day when *God judges mankind,* your punishment will be greater than the people in Tyre and Sidon.	13 "You are to be pitied, people of Korasin. You are to be pitied, people of Betsaida. For if *I* had done the powerful works/ miracles in Tiros and Sidon that I have done there at your place, the people there would long have regretted and left their sin and as is their custom they would dress in sacks and sprinkle ashes on themselves to show their regret. 14 When the day of judgment comes the judgment for you will be greater than the judgment for the people of Tiros and Sidon.

As can be seen, the translations include very little of that background information: Tagbanwa fills in only that the people of Tyre and Sidon were non-Jewish; the Western Bukidnon Manobo translation adds further that the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida were Jews and that on judgment day God will judge mankind; both this translation and the Yakan one indicate that it was Jesus who did the miracles.

While the information provided may be of some help to biblically illiterate readers, the point brought out by the explicit analysis given above is that *much more would be needed to make the passage reasonably intelligible.* On the other hand, it is quite clear that explicating more information would soon distort the focus and perhaps the coherence of the passage.

As suggested already in Gutt (1988) and Gutt (1992), in many situations the magnitude of the background information needing to be supplied for reasonably successful communication requires the embedding of Bible translation in a wider programme of biblical communication. In a recent, thought-provoking article Freddy Boswell, SIL International Translation Coordinator, has drawn attention to this need to be "more aware of contextual issues and holistic communication strategies" (Boswell 2002: 55). The "tough questions" he lists for which Bible translators need to find adequate answers, include those of how to express "implied information…background information…contextual information" and "teaching information" (Boswell 2002:55). In a similar vein, Hill writes, "Contextual adjustment is not something that is accomplished quickly with a single input. It must be couched in a communication strategy that provides multiple inputs over time, and involves many ministries of the church" (Hill 2002:75).

The different factors that have to be taken into account for such programmes are too numerous to even list here. However, again building on recent insights into communication, it seems useful to draw attention to a couple of factors.

[11] These back-translations are found on Translators Workplace 4.0.

4.1 The challenge of timing

As relevance theory shows, the success of communication crucially depends on the right contextual information being highly accessible *at the right time*. Thus it is not sufficient that this information is *physically* available somewhere in the receptor language; to become effective for comprehension it must be highly accessible *mentally* to the reader or hearer *at the time when it is needed*. Thus while it is true in a general way that the translation of Old Testament portions is important because they provide background information necessary for understanding the New Testament, for it to be profitable for the comprehension of a particular New Testament passage, readers must be able to access in their minds just those pieces of information from the Old Testament that are relevant to this specific passage.

Note that this requires more than just familiarity with those portions; it requires the readers' ability to select the particular pieces of information needed for the NT passage in question out of a sizeable body of information. Information from the Old Testament can lead to all sorts of interpretations, some of which may be valid but not part of the intended meaning of the passage, some of which will be quite wrong, and only some of which will lead to its intended interpretation.

In the original communication situation the "synchronisation" of context selection was controlled by the accessibility structure of the mutual cognitive environment of author and audience. In cross-cultural, secondary communication situations this common accessibility structure rarely exists naturally, but most often must be created by appropriate means. This, then, is another essential part of an adequate strategy for biblical literacy.

4.2 The challenge of effort and motivation

Another closely related set of issues biblical literacy needs to address is that of effort and motivation. According to the insights of modern communication studies, processing effort plays a key role in communication; human beings tend to be very economically minded when it comes to the expenditure of effort: they have a very strong tendency to avoid unnecessary effort. On the one hand, this tendency is extremely valuable: it imposes crucial constraints on the comprehension process without which communication would hardly work at all. On the other hand, it also limits what is communicable to a particular group of people: people will not process just any information offered to them; *they will invest effort only if and as long as they are convinced that it is worth their while*. Thus one of the challenges faced in biblical literacy is how to motivate people sufficiently to process the background information offered.

Generally speaking, motivation can be of two kinds: the desire for positive experiences or the fear of negative ones - in the common idiom, the carrot and the stick. In the case of biblical literacy, generally speaking, only the carrot is available.[12] Now there is a kind of "carrot" that is intrinsic to communication: it consists in the experience of relevance, the reward of cognitive effects, and according to current insights, it is the central factor that makes human communication work. One might also describe it as the *satisfaction of comprehension*, the satisfaction one experiences when one feels that one has understood the other.

While the satisfaction of comprehension is a *necessary* condition for successful communication, it alone may not be *sufficient* for sustaining the processing effort necessary for larger chunks of information. In real life, information from different kinds of sources frequently competes for our attention, and it is usually the one that promises the greatest benefits that is the winner. In this competition, often factors other than cognitive benefits can exert a strong influence. After all, communication is not just an end in itself. The information exchange it facilitates can affect us and our lives in innumerable ways. It can help us build and maintain social relationships, it can help us to satisfy emotional or physical needs, and so forth. Any of these factors can affect people's motivation, and either strengthen or distract from their interest in translated Scriptures.

[12] This is probably one of the major differences between the concept of biblical literacy as used here and that of cultural literacy developed by Hirsch. While formal education tries to make itself as palatable to the pupils as possible, it can also use the stick, at least in countries where formal education is compulsory.

This fact seems to be borne out by Dye's research into factors determining the spiritual impact of Bible translations. He found that "the single most important thing that a translator can do to bring response is to apply the Good News to personal needs, hopes and problems as frequently as possible. …In the fifteen programmes studied, more than half of the variation noted in spiritual results was related to how well this one thing was done" (Dye 1985:61). Dye called this "the principle of 'Personal Relevance'" and expressed it more formally as follows: "People respond to the gospel in proportion to their conviction that God and his word are relevant to the concerns of daily life" (1985: 39). [13]

Thus the motivational factor needs to be carefully considered in the design of biblical literacy programmes. It is not enough to test whether the materials provide the information necessary for adequate comprehension *when used,* though this is important. One has to also assess *whether or under what circumstances receptors actually use these materials*. Bible background materials may be very good in covering all the ground necessary; however, if they require too much effort or offer too little benefit, they will remain unused and hence be of no help for comprehension.

In many situations, separate tests may have to be run for different groups of people; for example, motivational factors among church members may be quite different from those outside.

5. Conclusion

The realisation that communication works inferentially, with a cause and effect relationship between intended meaning, stimulus and context is of great significance and value for Bible translation in a number respects.

Firstly, it enables a *more realistic appraisal of the holistic nature of the challenge of communication via translation*. Each biblical text was written into a particular cultural context, and for outsiders to understand that text they need to be adequately literate in that culture.

Secondly, it provides a *more realistic impression of the magnitude of the challenge*. It is not just missing bits and pieces of information that hinder people's comprehension, as has often been assumed, but the absence of whole mental models.

Thirdly, it foregrounds *the vital importance of biblical literacy as an integral part of the Bible translation strategy*. It brings out clearly that providing translated Scriptures without an adequate strategy for biblical literacy has as much prospect of success as preparing written materials for a pre-literate group without an effective strategy for literacy.

Fourthly, by providing a better understanding of the complex cause-effect relations and the influence of processing effort in communication, it facilitates the design of more effective strategies for biblical literacy.

Due to the complexity of communication and the diversity of situations around the world, there are no "three easy steps to successful Bible translation." It will take the concerted effort of all involved to tackle this challenge, documenting methods already tried, further testing their respective strengths and weaknesses in different situations, developing new means and sharing experiences across the vast spectrum of situations in which Bible translation is done. It is a daunting task but also one of great promise for maximising the impact of the Bible translation strategy.

[13] While Dye's concept of "personal relevance" focuses on relevance with regard to specific domains of life - the "personal needs, hopes and problems" (1985:61) - he does indicate that this presupposes "a clear message," "a Gospel message which can really be understood" (1985:60), which would presuppose optimal relevance in the sense of relevance theory.

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