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Checking Translations for Discourse Features

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Abstract

This paper builds on one entitled, "The Relevance of Greek Discourse Studies to Exegesis" (Levinsohn 2006b), and seeks to address how consultants might ensure that the features discussed there have been adequately handled in a translation into a receptor language. Initially, translators need to have undertaken appropriate research into the way that relevant discourse features function in the language. The features that should most concern consultants are those that function in significantly different ways in the source and receptor languages. A common error in translation is to use a countering or logical connective (at times, borrowed from the *lingua franca* of the area) when the natural way to encode the relation in the receptor language is different. Finally, a word-by-word back-translation may well be necessary in order to check that some discourse features have been handled correctly.

1. Introduction

In an earlier paper (Levinsohn forthcoming-a), I stressed the importance of a good exegesis of a passage in the Greek New Testament for considering whether the order of constituents within the individual clauses and sentences is default or marked. I highlighted the importance, if one or more constituents precede the verb, of determining whether any 'emphasis' associated with such an order is topic-like or focus-like, and of taking into account the presence versus absence of the article in reaching that decision. I also underlined the importance of analyzing the function of conjunctions like γάρ, δέ and καί in terms of the distinct pragmatic constraint that each imposes on interpretation.

The next question I would like to address is: how does a consultant ensure that these features have been adequately handled in a translation into a receptor language?

2. Appropriate study of comparable features of the receptor language

First of all, one needs to ensure that **appropriate** research has been undertaken into the way that comparable features function in the receptor language. Has the significance of variations in constituent order in their language been determined from studies of **appropriate** natural texts? Has the researcher determined the function of the conjunctions used in these texts, when the texts mark semantic or pragmatic relations and when they are left implicit? Also, has the researcher identified and distinguished the functions of the different markers of 'emphasis' that are used in natural texts?

In the above paragraph, I have twice bolded the word **appropriate** because, all too often, linguists analyze one type of text, then try to apply their conclusions to a different type. Before a recent workshop in East Asia, for instance, one expatriate advisor shared her frustration that the translation committee had rejected the suggestions she made on the basis of conclusions reached during a previous discourse workshop. It turned out, during that workshop, she had analyzed **folktales** told **orally**. She had then tried to apply the conclusions drawn from her analysis to **eye-witness** accounts recorded in **written** form. Such a transfer is comparable to learning how to grow apples, then applying what we have learnt to the cultivation of pineapples. Some of the principles we learnt may be of general application, but others will apply only to one genre!

This leads me to assert that it is best if the agenda for discourse-related research in a field entity is set by the Translation Department. To be adequately equipped to translate God's Word, translators need to have studied very specific text genres.

For example, the Bible does not contain many folktales. It does not have a large number of autobiographical narratives, either. Yet those are the two types of texts that are most commonly analyzed in discourse workshops. In contrast, the Bible contains lots of third person eye-witness narratives, including accounts of long debates.

Similarly, most of the hortatory material in the Bible is given by people who have the authority to **instruct** the exhortee (e.g., God or an apostle). In contrast, the sort of texts that are often analyzed in non-narrative workshops involve **persuasion** (e.g., parents giving advice to children who are about to get married or leave home).[1]

Furthermore, to be as relevant as possible to Bible translation, such texts should preferably have been written down and edited by a competent writer, rather than recorded orally.

3. Mismatches between different types of languages

The discourse features that should most concern consultants are those that function in significantly different ways in the source and receptor languages. Some of these mismatches arise when the two languages are of different types. Others are specific to particular languages or groups of languages.

3.1 Mismatches that arise when the two languages are of different types

Dryer (1997) distinguishes languages on the basis of two variables: whether or not the object (O) follows the verb (V) (VO versus OV) and whether or not the subject (S) commonly follows the verb (VS versus SV). A number of discourse features tend to correlate with these variables.

VO versus OV. You may already be aware, from work pioneered in Papua New Guinea by Terry Borchard (1991) and John Roberts (1997), of significant mismatches between VO and OV languages in a number of areas, particularly those involving HEAD-modifier relations at various levels. They concluded that it is often necessary to reorder propositions to ensure that the modifying one modifies the correct HEAD (see sec. 6 of Levinsohn forthcoming-b for detailed discussion of this point). Such reordering may also be necessary to ensure that it is the HEAD proposition, rather than the modifying one, that is more prominent (Levinsohn 1999).

VS versus SV. A second set of mismatches arises between languages in which it is common for the verb to precede the subject (VS) (Hebrew, Koiné Greek and N.W. Austronesian [Philippine] type) and those in which such an order is rare (SV). One area of potential mismatch involves how pre-verbal subjects in Greek or Hebrew should be handled in SV languages.

- In many SOV languages around the world, the equivalent of a source-language pre-verbal subject is often the combination of a subject and a topicalization marker.
- The situation is more complicated with SVO languages (unless they are pro-drop languages).[2] The choice facing the translator is often between ignoring the fact that the subject is pre-verbal in the source language and employing a marked form of topicalization.

To illustrate this, consider 1 Cor. 1:12c (Ἐγὼ μέν εἰμι Παύλου is literally, *I on the one hand am of Paul*). If English is your mother tongue, do you think it would be more appropriate to translate this proposition into English as 'I belong to Paul' (NRSV) or 'As for me, I belong to Paul' (see Miller and Martens 1998)? How about 'I, for my part, belong to Paul'?[3]

[1] For discussion of the differences between instruction and persuasion, see Levinsohn forthcoming-b.
[2] I would expect pro-drop languages to begin a sentence like 1 Cor. 1:12c with an independent pronoun (e.g., Spanish 'Yo…').
[3] Translations into French typically begin this sentence with 'Moi je' (literally, 'Me I'). In some languages, 'I here' is a way of expressing the same idea.

Another common mismatch between VS and SV languages involves **conjunctions**. It may be a coincidence, but all twenty of the languages I encountered in workshops in the south and north of the Philippines had an explicit strengthening connective whose function was virtually identical to γάρ in Koiné Greek and comparable to most uses of *kî* in Ancient Hebrew. In contrast, strengthening connectives like 'for' are used relatively infrequently in natural text in SVO languages and very rarely in SOV languages.

3.2 Mismatches specific to particular languages or groups of languages

It is not uncommon for a discourse feature to function in a very similar way throughout a set of related languages, or even across language families in an area of the world. The important thing, when preparing to consult in a 'new' language, is to be aware of those features that have been identified for other members of the language family or geographical area.

For example, **relative clauses** have been found to be used in the same very specific ways in large numbers of languages in Africa, as well as Ancient Hebrew (see Levinsohn 2005: secs. 10.3.6–7). And **non-restrictive** relative clauses tend to be found only in certain groups of languages.

Another example involves **demonstratives**. In some languages (e.g., Greek), the proximal pronoun (*this*) is often used anaphorically to refer to 'salient' entities. In other languages, it is the distal pronoun (*that*) that is used in this way. I think this distribution tends to correlate with language families.

Then there are the devices used for **backgrounding**. In many Indo-European languages, including Koiné Greek, the most common way to background one proposition in relation to another is to express it in a pre-nuclear subordinate clause. In other groups of languages, an interclausal particle may be the standard backgrounding device. In others again, a particular tense or aspect marker may be the preferred method of backgrounding information.

Highlighting devices are similar. For example, if a 'be' verb and/or cleft sentence is used in one language when highlighting a proposition, the chances are high that it will also be used with the same function in other languages of the same family.

This, incidentally, is a major failing in translations into English. Quite often, the equivalent in English of the preposing of a focus-like constituent in Greek is a cleft sentence, especially if the article has also been omitted. For example, a good translation of 1 Cor 1:13b-c (μὴ Παῦλος ἐσταυρώθη ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, ἢ εἰς τὸ ὄνομα Παύλου ἐβαπτίσθητε;) might well be, 'Was it Paul that was crucified for you? Or was it in the name of Paul that you were baptized?'

4. Mismatches in the encoding of countering and logical relations

A common error in translation is to insert a countering (adversative) or logical connective (at times, borrowed from the *lingua franca* of the area) when the natural way to encode the relation in the receptor language is different.[4] Also, sometimes it is the translation consultant who is at fault in this area. A recent workshop in East Asia found that such connectives in one language were only used under very specific circumstances in natural text. This confirmed the instincts of the mother tongue translator, who had only inserted many of the connectives in her draft at the insistence of her consultant!

The following factors may determine when a countering or logical relation is marked or is left implicit.

- The **default** way of expressing the relation may be to leave it implicit. The relation is marked only when it would otherwise be **unclear** or to **draw attention** to it.

  Under such circumstances, care must be taken not to make a relation explicit when to do so would produce the wrong effect. An early draft of Luke 2:19 in Dogosé (Gur, Burkina Faso) began with a countering connective (***But*** *Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart*—NIV). The effect was to draw an explicit contrast with the events of the previous verse (*all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them*). This implied that Mary was NOT amazed at what the shepherds said! The translation was changed!

[4] For specific examples in different contexts, see Levinsohn 2005: sec. 6.4.1.

- In some (perhaps, many) languages, a connective is only used to make certain relations explicit when the proposition being introduced is **more important** or at least as important as the preceding one.

  In some SVO languages, for instance, using a connective to introduce material that supports a previously stated THESIS often implies that the supportive material is more important than the THESIS. As a result, certain relations between the THESIS and supportive material are normally left implicit in these languages when the style is **deductive**. The relation is only marked when the THESIS (typically, the more important material) follows the supportive material (**inductive** style).

  The following examples reflect the *français courant* translation into French:

  Deductive style: Luke 7:7*f*

THESIS		*Just give the order, and my servant will get well.*
support	**Ø**	*I, too, am a man placed under the authority of superior officers...*

  Inductive style: Matt. 9:37*f*

support		*The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few;*
THESIS	***therefore***	*ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.*

- Conversely, certain relations between the THESIS and supportive material are normally left implicit in some OV languages when the style is **inductive**. The following example from Chadian Arabic (OV at least in Classical Arabic) uses inductive style, so the conjunction meaning 'so, therefore' is not used:

support	**&**	*how will your daughter learn all that? Only with your help, mother.*
THESIS	**Ø**	*Get this into your head, mother: 'If I don't set my daughter an example, she will not turn out as I want'.*

- The relation may be marked only when the **order** of propositions is not the default or preferred one.

  For example, Roberts (1997:29) found the following correlation between the order of the verb (V) and the object (O), on the one hand, and the order of the POSITIVE and negative propositions, on the other:

Constituent order	Preferred propositional order
VO	POSITIVE – negative
OV	negative – POSITIVE

  Although the above correlations reflect the preferred order of propositions, most languages also allow them to be put in the opposite order. Often, however, the preferred or default order uses the default means of conjoining, whereas the marked order needs a marked connective:

Propositional order	Means of conjoining
default/preferred	default
marked	marked connective

  This is illustrated with the POSITIVE-negative correlation in Koiné Greek and English (VO). When the propositions occur in their preferred order, the default connective (καί, *and*) is used. When they occur in the opposite order, a marked connective (ἀλλά, *but*) is required:

default order:	*Allow the children to come to me*	**καί/*and***	*do not prevent them!* (Luke 18:16)
marked order:	*Lead us not into temptation*	**ἀλλά/*but***	*deliver us from evil!* (Matt. 6:13).

The converse is found in Konso (Ethiopia—OV). When the default negative-POSITIVE order occurs, the default connective **ka** is used. When the marked POSITIVE-negative order occurs, the marked connective **umma** is used. (In fact, POSITIVE-connective-negative is the preferred order in a number of Ethiopian OV languages, including Amharic.)

5. The mechanics of checking back-translations for discourse features

To check some discourse features, a **word-by-word** back-translation is generally necessary. This makes it much easier for the consultant to verify whether the order of constituents is default or marked, whether any constituents have been topicalized, whether relations between propositions have been handled appropriately, whether one proposition has been backgrounded in relation to another, etc.

In 'Discourse-for-Translation' workshops in the Philippines in 2004, the checking of 1 Thessalonians in the different languages was preceded by three and one-half weeks of analysis of native authored texts. This allowed me to be very specific in my questions to the translator.

The following are a few of the questions I asked about a draft translation into one of the languages (VSO). The expatriate language advisor and the mother tongue translator provided me with the translation into the language together with a word-by-word translation. These are followed by my comments and the responses from the translator.

1 Th. 2.4 Yakon gapu ta pinanoknokan Apodios'e dikani angipalawag atte ambalu we damag, siya koonni. Dakam pun atta tagu inonnoogni pas-oman, yakon ak Apodios pas-omanni. Siya amadas nu ngai awa ambalu bakon nu lawweng atta somsomok da tagu.

But because God proved/approved that we should be the ones to proclaim the good news, that is what we do. It's not people that we are trying to please, but God is whom we please. He is the one who tries/tests what is good or bad in the thinking of people.

Comment on backgrounding: The way you have subordinated 'God proved/approved that we should be the ones to proclaim the good news' backgrounds it with respect to 'that is what we do'. In the Greek source text, it is a main proposition, complementing the negative ones of v. 3. I suggest, 'God proved/approved that we should be the ones to proclaim the good news, and that is also what we do'. **Answer**: Will try that.

Query on the connective used: Is the second *yakon* the correct 'but', following a negative proposition, when the next (positive) proposition states essentially the same thing positively? **Answer**: It would be possible to omit *yakon* in the second sentence.

1 Th. 2.9 Susunud, adiyu pun naliwatan inonni ye pummangog. Sa algaw kan labi antuttudukani ya ankewaalkani ta adikani summosop kan dikayu si inninggawanni sinat. Kakna inonni ye nangipalawag atte sadi ye ambalu we damag.

Siblings, you did not forget the way we worked hard. Day and night we taught and we worked so that we would not sponge off you at the time we stayed there (close to hearer). Like that is how we proclaimed that good news.

Comprehension Question on 'that good news': what is its source? **Answer**: Paul. **Change back** to 'from God'.

Comment on the connection: By starting with the vocative and no connective, the support relation of 9 to 8 is less obvious. If *te* ['for'] is inappropriate, something like 'for example' would be good. **Answer**: will try starting with 'Yes for' (*On te*).

1 Th. 4.11 gamgamanyu okyan angginok'e biyag, abus kuwayu ak ambiyanganyu, kad ikewaalyu da masapulyu, kama atte imbagani kan dikayu.

you should aspire (go after, keep thinking to reach) a quiet (causing no quarrels) life, only things-belonging-to-you are the things you-are-concerned-about, and you work for your needs, like what we told you.

Query on the connective used: You have used *kad* [a disjunctive 'and'] to introduce 'you work for your needs'. Why not *ya* [associative 'and']? (*Kad* suggests that working for your needs in some sense is a consequence of being concerned about only your own affairs.) **Answer**: Change to *ya*.

1 Th. 5.3 Kanan kad da tagu we "Allam-aykani ya ippun ibabauyni," nadanatong dusa'e anadail kan dida kad naippun paat ossaan ak makaawid. Sadi isun ni mapokkatan sumigab de buwang ni anggumutˆe bubai.

When people say, "We are peaceful and we have-nothing to-worry-about," punishment that destroys comes-suddenly on them and there-is-not one at all who is able-to-run-away. That is like the suddenness of the stomach of a woman in labor becoming-painful.

Comment on the connective used: I was pleased to note the linker (*we*) introducing the reported speech, as that has the effect of backgrounding the speech with respect to what follows.

Comment on the order of propositions: One effect of moving the comparison to the end is to make it rather pointless (and also to separate it from the thing it is being compared with). I do not think you should change the order! **Try** reordering (with other necessary changes).

1 Th. 5.10 we siya natoy para kan ditaku ta unoy iinggawtaku kan siya ak inggana takon ay nu dadak-agontaku bakon nu nasuyoptaku atte umaliyana.

who was the one was died for us so that we will stay with him forever even though we are ready/alert or we sleep when he comes.

Comment on the order of propositions: Putting the *nu*-clause at the end makes it focal. In Greek, the focus is on 'we will stay with him forever'. The *nu*-clause should occur immediately after *ta* 'so that'. **Answer**: Will try this, with modifications.

6. Concluding comments

An anonymous referee asks how a translation consultant who does not speak the receptor language can check for discourse features such as those I have outlined in these two articles. In an ideal world, the consultant would be aware (through participation in discourse workshops and/or through discourse write-ups) of those features that must be controlled in a particular group of languages if the translation is to communicate correctly. I found such to be the case in the Cameroon branch of SIL. For instance, it was from translation consultants in Cameroon that I learned that relative clauses are used in very specific ways in languages of the area (see sec. 3.2).

Even without such knowledge, though, translation consultants can equip themselves to check for some discourse features.

1. If the consultant is aware of typical mismatches between types of languages and knows whether the receptor language is basically OV, VSO or SVO (see sec. 3.1), then he or she will have certain expectations about the ordering of propositions and constituents and the use or non-use of connectives in different contexts.

2. If appropriate discourse studies have been undertaken in the language concerned or in others of the same family, the consultant can request a summary of the conclusions reached. (The NARR-CHEK questionnaire [Levinsohn 2005] provides a framework for presenting such conclusions for narrative and I plan to develop a similar questionnaire for non-narrative.)

If no appropriate discourse studies have been undertaken in the language concerned or in others of the same family, then the translation consultant should have no hesitation in instructing the consultee to undertake such studies before any translation is approved for publication. My experience from recent workshops is that discourse-related problems are at least twice as common as exegesis-related ones!

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