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Bible Translation and Orality

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Abstract

In the last decade or so, the United Bible Societies have paid increasing attention to orality, features of orality in biblical texts, and what impact these should have on Bible translation. Articles appeared in *The Bible Translator*, an Orality Working Group was convened in 2008, a Source Text and Orality Workshop for Europe-Middle East translation consultants took place in January 2011, and an Intersemiotic Translation workshop was held in March 2011. Some of these findings have led the author to reflect on performance criticism in this contribution.[*]

1. Orality in *The Bible Translator*

As Voth (2005) points out, prophets in the Ancient Near East communicated their message orally. This message was then communicated to the king through a scribe, who edited the message. The Mesopotamian prophetic texts from Mari (18th century BC) and Nineveh (7th century BC) are among the best known bodies of non-biblical prophetic texts. Although the original oral form is not recoverable, features of an oral register can still be traced in the written form. Writing served as the means to support what was primarily oral communication (Loubser 2007).

Voth goes on to compare Ancient Near Eastern prophetic texts with biblical texts. A biblical prophetic text would often begin in an oral context. As prophetic texts were written and revised, they would still be influenced by the need to present them orally in what was predominantly an oral culture: scribes "broke divine knowledge" to an illiterate population.

De Vries (2000:109) mentions the repetition of the phrase "God gave them over" in Romans 1:24, 26, 28 as an example of an audible cohesion signal.

2. Orality Working Group 2008

A few years ago a working group of UBS translation consultants from different continents discussed orality and Bible translation. They recognized that issues of orality are important in translation not only because there are many traditionally oral cultures in the world, but also because a new orality is coming up in societies that would not regard themselves as oral. Functional illiteracy is increasing, at least in Western societies. More and more texts and books are distributed through multimedia, in audio or audiovisual format, rather than only in print. Storytelling is having a great impact. News and stories on the internet may come to us in video format. Thus, increasingly, oral communication is replacing written or printed communication.

Stories may be entertaining or otherwise creative. Beyond this, the function of stories is twofold. Narratives are told with a view to transformation as well as preservation. They preserve and pass on values, norms and practices, but they also help a society to transform itself, bringing about change and justice. Jesus' parables on the Kingdom of God are a clear example.

A translator of biblical texts can produce a more expressive and communicative translation by becoming a storyteller, as it were, taking into account oral features in the source text and making use of all the oral

[*] An earlier version of this paper was presented on June 9, 2011, at the TALC Conference at SIL in Horsleys Green, UK.

resources of the target language. Certain musical styles and textual genres will be preferred in the target culture. Voice, gestures and facial expressions all play a part as the storyteller presents the text orally.

Which textual features, then, are likely to be traces of orality and storytelling? The episodic development (rather than a chronological, linear progression) of the narrative in Mark is one example (Rhoads *et al.* 2012). Other features are repetition of key terms, key phrases and formulas (for example, in prophetic texts). These features may seem redundant at times, but they help the storyteller to memorize and remember. A clear example is what is found four times in Job 1:13–18:

> I alone have escaped to tell you.
> While he was still speaking,
> another came and said…
> I alone have escaped to tell you.

3. Performance criticism

At this point it may be good to reflect on performance criticism, a relatively new approach to biblical texts. It is important from the start to distinguish between performance criticism of the source text and performance criticism of translations. (See www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org for further reference.)

3.1. Performance criticism of the source text

Many of the biblical texts we now have were, in their original setting, composed orally. All that remains of their original delivery is a text. However, the written text still contains traces of that delivery, which can be regarded as a performance. In this respect, biblical texts are to be compared with the other prophetic texts discussed above.

3.2. Performance criticism of a translation

When we assess a translation—whether it is ongoing or completed—from the point of view of performance criticism, we consider its textual genres and its styles (including appropriate background music if it is an audio translation). Are the genre and style of a translated text suitable for such a text in the target culture? Are they suitable for the biblical text concerned? Do they help the translation to have an impact on the audience in a communal setting?

These questions are all the more important if the translation actually involves the transformation of the biblical text into another medium, for example, film, drama, or ballet.

3.3. Performance types

The 2008 Orality Working Group mentioned both storytelling and recitation. For both, it is the choice of the voice (or voices) as well as pitch and tone that determine whether the performance is effective. In storytelling, the personalities of the characters as well as the salient points in the narrative should come through clearly.

Rap is not only a rhythmical form of recitation—it is also a specific genre which may be very effective in the target culture. See Crisp (2011) for a rap translation of the Letter of Jude. I quote verses 9–10:

> Archangel Michael—man, now he was different.
> He had a fight about old Moses' body,
> but didn't dare to hurl insults at Satan.
> Instead he left the whole thing to the Lord.
> But these don't even know what they are dissing.
> They live and die just like wild animals.

Other types of performance are drama, opera and ballet. The choice of characters, their interactions, moods, movements, gestures—in sum, their characterization—are crucial and should be based on specific stage directions. For example, movements, which in the text may just be implied or mentioned in passing, have to

be represented visually. Information in the text may thus have to be augmented by means of performance directions in the margin.

As the Working Group noted, translating involves the preparation of a script, with specific instructions to the oral presenters as to what the audience should see and hear: voices, images and illustrations, sounds and music, acting and gestures, costumes and props. To make this possible, a translation team should be interdisciplinary. For example, translation consultants should give their input to the script for the translation or transformation—already at the drafting stage. Is the translation or transformation consistent with the message of the biblical text?

4. Source Text, Orality and Translation: Is the Bible Oral?

Bible translation consultants in Europe and the Middle East presented papers on this topic at a workshop in January 2011. A summary is given below, making special use of the papers by Marijke de Lang and Phil Pike.

4.1. Was performance part of the original text?

There is evidence that orality determined how the text was communicated in a communal setting. Some New Testament letters contain instructions that the letter should be "read out to others" (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). Jesus read biblical texts aloud and interpreted them orally in the synagogue. In the Greek world, texts would be declaimed, though not as drama, at *symposia* (social meetings that provided an occasion for discussion and debate, celebration or entertainment). However, there is no evidence that biblical texts were conceived or communicated as a dramatic performance.

Of course the Book of Psalms contains exceptions to this. Psalm 118, for example, with its antiphonal singing by a song leader and choir, appears to throw light on ritual practices in the Jerusalem Temple, including stage directions for the procession "up to the horns of the altar" (Ps. 118:27). Of special interest is a fascinating chapter entitled "'The Musical!': Psalm 118," in Magonet (2004:121–133).

Performance criticism sometimes asserts (see Maxey 2009:9,139) that meaning is not found in the source text, but is negotiated between the performer and the local audience, so that the text is likely to mean something different in different target cultures. But exegesis should search for the meaning of the text in the context of the original author. Only then will translators (or performers) know what message is in the text that they should contextualize and localize in the target culture.

4.2. Was orality part of the original text?

In 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23, for example, it is evident that orality is part and parcel of the original text itself. It indicates that the text was not only communicated orally but even conceived as an oral text:

> All things are lawful for me,
> but not all things are beneficial.
> All things are lawful for me,
> but I must not become a slave to anything. (1 Cor. 6:12)

The written text does not mark in any way that the phrase "all things are lawful for me" is actually quoting the voice of the audience, while the author corrects possible wrong implications of this statement. A written translation may highlight this by means of quotation marks and even introductory phrases:

> You say, "All things are lawful for me"
> —but not all things are beneficial.
> You say, "All things are lawful for me"
> —but I must not become a slave to anything.

With such a translation, the orality of the text is actually being adapted for print.

Most translations are currently prepared as a written translation to be printed, after which the translation may be adapted for an audio recording. A print-oriented translation tends to delete the oral features of change of voice and embedded direct speech, while such features are easily preserved in audio. Given that

there are oral features in the text, we should perhaps be translating directly for audio, and adapt the translation for print later.

4.3. Inversion as a memory device

In a biblical text, two or more topics may first be introduced together and then discussed in more detail in the order in which they were mentioned. However, if the topics are not discussed in the order in which they were mentioned before, but in reverse order, we may call this inversion. A clear example is Genesis 3:9–19:

> 9 But the Lord God called to the *man*…
> 12 The man said, "The *woman*…"
> 13 Then the Lord God said to the woman…
> The woman said, "The *serpent*…"
> 14 The Lord God said to the *serpent*…
> 16 To the *woman* he said…
> 17 and to the *man* he said …

The man, the woman and the serpent are addressed in reverse order from the order in which they were introduced. That is how the text presents it. Inversion may have been a rhetorical device, or a memory device for the storyteller. Perhaps one does not exclude the other.

Another interesting example of inversion is 1 Corinthians 1:13–4:13. Not unlike Hebrew and other Ancient Near Eastern prophets, Paul had scribes to whom he would dictate his letters orally. In 1 Corinthians 1:13 three topics are introduced by means of rhetorical questions: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

The respective answers are given in reverse order:

1:14–17	on baptism
1:18–2:16	on the cross
2:17–4:13	on divisions

It is conceivable that there are target languages in which it would be helpful to reverse the order of the introductory questions in 1:13.

4.4. Performing a text—Ruth in music

As mentioned, performing a text involves characterizing the persons in the text. In her dissertation *The Performed Bible: The Story of Ruth in Opera and Oratorio*, Helen Leneman (2007) assesses how the individuals in the book of Ruth and their words have been characterized in a number of musical works.

It turns out that, while Ruth's words in 1:16–17 are mostly sung in a major key, Naomi's words in 1:20–21 are mostly sung in a minor key. The groups of people in the narrative—women, reapers and gleaners, elders, women—are represented by a choir. The effect of having different people perform the different characters is that characters and their moods become more distinct in the oratorio or opera than in the original narrative, as could also be done in an audio production.

The compositions discussed in Leneman's book are western and are influenced by musical norms of the target culture. For example, Ruth is mostly sung by a soprano—in western opera the love interest of the tenor is usually a soprano. Naomi tends to be sung by an alto (or mezzosoprano)—this voice is usually given to an older woman. Boaz is mostly sung by a bass or baritone—this type of voice stands for wisdom and authority (while the tenor normally stands for romantic involvement).

4.5. Dramatizing a text

In 1868 a pupil of Mendelssohn, Otto Goldschmidt, composed an oratorio, *Ruth: A Sacred Pastoral.* In it, Ruth sings about her meeting with Boaz on the threshing floor after the encounter has taken place. The scene itself is not played out—we hear about it from her own mouth, only after it has happened. As

Leneman (2007:55) observes: "The first-person account of their encounter is an effective dramatic device…. This excited re-telling is more effective than presenting it in the Scroll's original narrative form [in third person] would have been…. It is an almost cinematic flashback effect."

This dramatic device, then, is part of Goldschmidt's rendition of Ruth. But there are instances where such a change of grammatical person, leading to an increased dramatic effect, is part and parcel of the original text itself. A clear example is Jeremiah 35:

1 The word that came to *Jeremiah*…
3–5 So *I* took…
12 Then the word of the Lord came to *Jeremiah*…
18 But to the house of the Rechabites *Jeremiah* said…

Chapter 35 refers to Jeremiah as a character, in the third person, while he changes roles by becoming the narrator himself, speaking in the first person, in verses 3–5. Other examples of a third person character who temporarily becomes the first person narrator himself are the prophet in Jeremiah 32:6b, 8–13, 16 (in contrast to verses 6a, 26) and the king in Daniel 4:1–13, 18, 34–37 (in contrast to verses 19, 28–33).

There will be no need to adapt this oral feature in the original text when the text is translated for oral performance or recorded for audio: Jeremiah 35:3–5 can be spoken by a different voice. A translation which aims for naturalness in print, however, may have to make adaptations. In the *Good News Bible*, for example, Jeremiah has become the narrator, speaking in the first person throughout the chapter. The opposite can be found in *Français Courant*, which refers to Jeremiah throughout the chapter in the third person, as a character.

1 The Lord said to *me*…
3–5 So *I* took… (as in the Hebrew text)
12 Then the Lord told *me*…
18 Then *I* told…
(GNB, Jeremiah as narrator only)

1 *Jérémie* reçut… (as in Hebrew)
3-5 *Jérémie* alla…
12 Le Seigneur dit alors à *Jérémie*… (as in Hebrew)
18 Puis *Jérémie* déclara… (as in Hebrew)
(FC, Jeremiah as a character only)

5. Intersemiotic Translation Workshop

Performance criticism and other topics mentioned above were explored further at an intersemiotic translation workshop in March 2011. The workshop was held by the American Bible Society's Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship. Among the participants were a number of UBS translation consultants from different parts of the world.

Why the term intersemiotic translation? As we said, translation may involve the transformation of the biblical text into another medium, for example, film, drama, ballet. Semiotics is the study of communication as a system of signs. The system of signs and the relations between them varies from medium to medium. Intersemiotic translation, then, is about transforming signs from one medium to another.

One implication of this for the practice of translation is that translators have to work with a checklist of transformation steps. What are the signs in the original text in its original format, and how should these signs be transformed into signs that fit the medium of the translation in a new cultural context? This analysis should be made in advance, with the help of a translation consultant. Translators should learn how to make such an intersemiotic analysis.

A translation that is prepared for audio will be more suitable to be performed than one that is prepared only for print.

In Conclusion

- We should recognize that the source texts we now have were, in their original settings, presented orally, and analyze them from that perspective.
- Telling the story, the written text with its oral features became and becomes an oral text again in translation.
- A translation of the (oral features of the) text should fit the appropriate oral genre of the target culture.
- Translation is transformation—not only the transformation of a text from one language to another, across linguistic and cultural boundaries, but also its transformation from one medium to another.

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