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Bible Translation
An Interview with Katy Barnwell

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Abstract: In June 2020, senior translation consultant and author Katharine "Katy" Barnwell met virtually with Drew Maust and Lynell Zogbo for an interview discussing her classic textbook *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course in Translation Principles*, now available in a thoroughly revised and expanded fourth edition. Barnwell shares about her personal journey, the evolution of her textbook, and significant challenges and changes facing the Bible translation movement. In this article, the authors offer readers an enhanced transcript of that interview.

Drew Maust (DM): We are pleased to have our special guest Katy Barnwell with us today. Special thanks to Lynell Zogbo for agreeing to lead the interview. If you have done any reading on the history of Bible translation in Africa, you will have come across Lynell's name. She is a very prolific author. She earned her PhD in linguistics from UCLA and has served for over thirty years as a translation consultant with the United Bible Societies (UBS). She's supposedly retired now, but I'm not sure whether to believe that, because she just keeps churning out *Translator's Handbooks* both in English and French. One thing to note about Lynell is that she loves poetry, especially Hebrew poetry. She pours herself into her work, writing helps in French for those who wish to translate Hebrew poetry into their language. Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Katy and Lynell.

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Lynell Zogbo (LZ): I would like to introduce our main event for today, Katharine Barnwell, but known to most people as Katy. She's been involved in Bible translation since 1963. She began with Wycliffe Bible Translators working on Mbembe in Cross River State, Nigeria. She did her PhD on the grammar of that language, finishing in 1970. She has spent most of her career as a teacher, trainer, and translation consultant. She has worked with SIL International and the Seed Company, where she now serves as senior translation consultant. Most of you have probably either been in a workshop with or taught by Katy, or at least have read her articles and books. I don't think there's anyone in SIL, Lutheran Bible Translators (LBT), UBS, the Seed Company, Pioneer Bible Translators—any of those—who have not been in contact with Katy's thinking, writing, and teaching. We're very honoured to have her with us today. Welcome, Katy, and may God bless this time as we discuss together.

DM: Today we are celebrating the newly released fourth edition of Katy's book, *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course in Translation Principles* (SIL International, 2020), the publication of which prompted this event. We're very grateful to Katy for accepting to discuss not only the book, but Bible translation more generally.

I want to answer two common questions that SIL Publications has received related to the release of this book. The first is when can we expect an electronic version? They're working on it, and they hope to have it out by the end of 2021. So, we're going to keep our fingers crossed, hoping that it gets out very, very soon. I know it'll be very popular.

Second, a lot of people have been asking about translations of the book. I know there's a French translation of the third edition, which is much appreciated. I believe there's also a German version, a Spanish version, and others. A lot of people want to know how long they must wait until this book is translated into their mother tongue. SIL Publications has said that they are currently negotiating translations. They request that those who are interested in having it translated into a specific language reach out to them and express interest in that language, letting Sales know how they might be able to facilitate that process. You can write to them at sales_intl@sil.org, and they will follow up with you.

LZ: Before we start in on questions about this new edition of your book, I thought we could start with a few personal questions. We'd like to hear a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, and most importantly, how you got interested in Bible translation and ended up in Africa.

Katy Barnwell (KB): I grew up in the United Kingdom, moving around quite a bit. During my school days, I lived in Rotherham, Inverness, Shrewsbury, and eventually Goring-on-Thames, which has become my long-term home. This was

because my father was an engineer and worked in different locations to facilitate new developments. I grew up in a church-going Anglican family. I still have my first Bible, which was given me on my fourth birthday by my grandmother. I had two great aunts who were very influential in my life. They were sisters and they told me that they'd prayed for me every day since I was christened. I have much to be thankful for.

It was when I was at university that I became a committed believer and began to study my Bible seriously. That was also where I heard about Bible translation. George Cowan visited the Christian Union and when I heard about the need for Bible translation and what was involved, I immediately knew in my heart, "this is for me." I took the first Wycliffe training course in the summer of 1960, with John Bendor-Samuel as Director. The next year, I taught on the course; that was the way it was in those days.

John B-S, as he was known, was very influential. He guided me in registering with the School of Oriental and African Studies for PhD studies. My supervisor was M.A.K. Halliday, who developed the theory of structure-function grammar, analysing the relationship between form and meaning in a language. What better training could you have for Bible translation! At that time, John B-S was in the process of opening up SIL work in Africa; previously SIL had been working mainly in the Americas. So, my partner Pat and I were among the first few teams assigned to Nigeria, specifically to the Mbembe language of Cross River State. The first step was to learn to speak the language and collect texts.

LZ: Thank you. That is a wonderful story. Many of us, too, could speak to how J.B.S.—John Bendor-Samuel—influenced our lives and Bible translation. Speaking of the Mbembe, last year in Jerusalem, I had some Nigerian students, and I believe they were speakers of languages related to Mbembe. What happened in that work? Did you finish a translation? Is there ongoing work? How are things going in the Mbembe project?

KB: The New Testament was published in the major dialect, Mbembe-Adun, in 1985. There was a request early on for more translation, but in those days, Old Testament translation wasn't encouraged. It was only later that the way opened for Old Testament translation. The best way forward for this was clearly to get some Mbembe speakers trained. So, two men who are now leading translators studied at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria, including studies in Biblical Hebrew. One of them earned an MA with Hebrew specialisation. He's now the coordinator for the project. So, there's much to be thankful for. The OT is still in progress. It really only started in 2016. That's when it got underway. I've been making visits back to the Mbembe area to work with the teams as consultant, but currently I'm doing distance checking with them over Zoom.

There are three Mbembe projects now because, after the NT was published in Mbembe-Adun, the two other main dialects wanted their own translation. In fact, when the original survey was done, it was touch and go as to whether it would be considered as three different languages or as three dialects of one language. The dialects are indeed very different. The way we are working is that I check the passage with the teams in two of the dialects.

The leading translator of one of those dialects then checks the third dialect with myself reviewing. The two leading translators are both being mentored as consultants-in-training. So, there is indeed ongoing work. There is an active translation committee. The revision of the 1985 Mbembe-Adun New Testament is also in process, and work continues on an Mbembe-English dictionary, now including variants in all three main dialects.

LZ: That's a wonderful model for us to follow. I'm glad to hear it. Let's now move on to this new edition of your book that we're all excited to eventually see. How did the idea for the revision come about? Did you get feedback on the earlier editions? How did you go about revising? How long did it take?

KB: That's a load of questions! The main motivation was that I could see that there have been many changes in the Bible translation world over the last fifty years. And so I knew that revisions were needed. Then the SIL International publications department approached me saying that they wanted to do a new printing. They gave me the chance to revise. I don't think they expected me to do quite such an extensive revision, but that's the way it worked out. There was a lot to change, but it's more of an expansion, I would say; the basic principles are still the same.

LZ: How long did it take?

KB: Because I wasn't working on it full time, it took around two and a half years. With other responsibilities going on, it has taken quite a while. Conforming to the required formatting also took time.

LZ: Has the audience changed in your view from when you first wrote the book until now?

KB: The primary audience is still mother-tongue translators. Of course, nowadays virtually all translators are mother-tongue translators. Maybe we don't need that term anymore. But I recognise that today translators are typically much more highly educated than they were in 1975 when the first edition was published. In the year 1975 a lot of new things were happening. National responsibility and national Bible translation organisations were starting up. We were seeing the potential for people to translate into their own languages, realising that translations are much better done by speakers of the language. So, we developed

an introductory course in applied linguistics, guiding speakers in how to analyse and develop an orthography for your own language, as well as an introductory course in translation principles to show how to translate into your own language. The 1975 version was the textbook for that course. Then the second (1978) and third editions (1986) were expanded, with more examples and exercises.

LZ: How is the fourth edition different from previous editions? There are many issues we could talk about. The first I would ask is, does this book still have exercises and the like? Have you expanded them?

KB: Yes, it has exercises. In fact, it has an increased number of exercises. I've tried to grade them from easy to more difficult—or more challenging, I should say. Also, there's more practice in writing your own language, writing creatively, and studying and discovering how your own language works, especially discourse-level features. That's important. Also, there is more attention to the Old Testament and more OT examples. When I'm checking OT translations now, I keep finding illustrations of a principle, saying to myself, "That'll be a good one for the book," but then I think, "Oh, it's too late now."

LZ: A lot has happened—a lot of water under the bridge as they say—in translation theory and practice. What is your own view on translation theory? Do you still believe in dynamic or functional equivalence? What is your theoretical approach in the book?

KB: Nida's basic principles still hold good. The fundamental principles have not changed. One of the requests that I had about the book was a complaint from someone that the book didn't have anything about relevance theory. Well, of course, "relevance theory" didn't even exist when the first edition was written, but I have now included a couple of chapters with interaction and input from Ernst August-Gutt. But I'd say that's not a change; it's an additional insight rather than a change to the basic principles.

LZ: Did I see that there's now a website connected to the book?

KB: Yes. At the end of each chapter, there is a section called "online materials"[1] with links to PowerPoints, videos, and other resources. There's also a section listing suggestions for further reading. Gayle Sheehan is the one who worked out how to put these materials on the web. I think it's quite exciting—it has potential for expansion too. You can jump to the PowerPoints and handouts (what used to be handouts) and watch a few videos. Several of the "further reading" items have direct links, so you can jump to the article in *The Bible Translator* or wherever and read the article. I hope it will help and encourage people to use those resources,

[1] https://www.sil.org/resources/publications/bibletranslation_additionalmaterials/.

especially more advanced students. For example, it can help biblical scholars who are preparing to help with exegetical checking and so on. It's designed to provide easy access to further resources. I would hope that one day we'll be able to get it to link with Translator's Workplace although that hasn't happened yet, but hopefully in the future. There is huge scope for enterprising consultants to develop many more systematic online training resources.

LZ: It sounds very modern. I admire you for being on top of all these high-tech ways of linking things up. That's wonderful.

KB: Well, as I say, it was Gayle who worked out the technical way to link the resources. There's been a lot of partnership in this.

LZ: One area I also wanted to ask about is that we always say that we want faithful, natural, and comprehensible translations. Do you think that still holds or have your views on this changed?

KB: Accuracy, clarity, and naturalness are the three key concepts that are still in focus, but we've also addressed what is called "acceptability," keeping your specific audience in mind and translating with a particular audience in view. Again, I would say that's more of an addition rather than a change.

LZ: Like Skopos, you mean?

KB: Yes, exactly. In fact, there's a whole section of the book now (Part 7) which has information on that, including suggestions on how to write a translation brief, planning a translation project with a specific situation in view

LZ: That's great. The other thing I wondered is if you have any new insights into key terms, because I always turn to that part in your book and think about it. It's always a very hard subject.

KB: There is a little more on OT key terms, but not as much as I would wish there could be. There is more guidance to help people be aware of the resources that are available; there are many more online helps now. For example, Paratext's biblical terms tool, and jump links to the original texts, Hebrew or Greek, linking to lexicons and various other helps as well. There are rich resources on Logos Bible Software. I want to help people to be aware of those resources and how to access them. When it comes to the OT, though, you're the expert. I'm trying to help people be confident in what they know and also be aware of what they don't know. I always feel that I need to be aware of what I don't know—and therefore need to find out about—and where to find that needed help.

LZ: I'm sure it will be so helpful. In this edition, do you deal at all with orality or poetry?

KB: Orality certainly is a focus. Of course, focusing on orality is not a new thing. If you read Nida's early writings, he stresses orality, observing that translations are more often heard than read. I have tried to address the use of orality both in drafting translations and in checking and testing them—and also in reproducing them, sharing the Scriptures in audio form. Nowadays everybody has their cell phone and there's huge potential for sharing orally. In the process of translation and in the widespread sharing of those translations, orality is very important. I have tried to address that and to give links to other places where that issue is addressed.

LZ: Oh, that's great because orality really is the future, isn't it? You can't have good oral translations unless you do a written translation, I think, but even so, it's an issue that we can't get around right now in the world today.

KB: Yes, and I don't like to see people think of only oral translations. There may be some situations where that's appropriate, but for most projects, you need both oral production and written, because if you're going to study the Bible in depth, you have to study the written translation.

LZ: Yes, we do agree on that! Let's turn a little bit away from the book and talk about translation consultants and their training. In today's world, what do you think is the best way to train translation consultants? What are the profiles that we need? And how do we go about getting the people that we need?

KB: One very valuable source is people who have worked on translation in their own language. Experience in translating, I would say, is a very valuable asset, a learning process. And then I think of two things in particular. First, further studies including in-depth study of the biblical languages. That's something that has come much more into focus and for which there is much more potential and opportunity these days. There are excellent courses both on-site and online. In fact, I'm trying to brush up my rather scanty biblical Hebrew by doing an online course. There's huge potential for initial training and ongoing training for consultants, and consultants who haven't had exposure in their early training can get updated. So, the first is systematic training and the second is mentoring: working alongside experienced consultants, observing and then taking responsibility in consulting, while getting feedback from an experienced observer-mentor.

I think it's important to select people who are both committed and who will take this work seriously as a God-calling. We need to give trainee consultants proper support to get them through this training stage. I was concerned when someone recently shared that they felt that some consultants were dropping out because they hadn't received sufficient help, guidance, and opportunity. Those of us who are in administrative roles need to give serious attention to following

through so that those who have begun training complete that training and get into service.

LZ: What do you think about formal consultant training in workshops? Or one-book workshops? Ernst Wendland and I have been experimenting with the Jerusalem Center for Bible Translators (JCBT) and it seems to have a lot of potential.

KB: Absolutely. Both for trainee-consultants and trainee-translators, initial training must be followed up by feedback as experience builds up. One-book workshops are an excellent way to help people get into new areas: poetry, for example, starting your first translation of the Psalms. I am grateful for the excellent work that you and your team have done in that area, Lynell. We've really benefited from it. Both of the leading Mbembe translators have participated in courses at JCBT.

LZ: Thank you, Katy. I am thinking we're now in such a funny situation in the world with COVID and economic crises around the world. What do you think the future of Bible translation is in terms of our organisations: UBS, SIL, and others? Do you have any vision or dream or ideas on how we should move forward?

KB: I'm very thankful that there is much more emphasis on partnership nowadays. There's the alliance of organisations called Every Tribe, Every Nation (ETEN) and those who are seeking to promote partnership at the local level, the national level, and the international level. I think there is still a role for the different organisations, but we need to be ready to work together and to be cooperative. We need to listen to each other and to plan projects in a way that is realistic in terms of goals, but without putting time pressure on the translators, such that people are required to meet their goals at the expense of doing hasty translations that are not as good as they could be. We need to find the balance on those things.

LZ: Yes, I agree. Well, I think I've come to the end of my questions. Thank you for taking the time to reflect with us and answer these questions. Is there anything else you want to share with us?

KB: I'll share two things. One is a summary of changes in the Bible translation world to which we're adjusting and where we're seeing change:

The formation of national Bible translation organisations, national and local ownership, and involvement of local churches and communities in the translation process. That all started in the 1970s.

The availability of software and online resources designed for translation. Paratext has been a wonderful help, much appreciated and still developing.

Training now needs to include awareness of these resources and training in how to use them.

The value of partnership and teamwork, recognising different roles. Some people have more skill in exegesis, others have more skill in creative writing, creating natural and well-formed translations and translating poetry. You need to be a poet to translate poetry.

- Developing a translation brief and Skopos theory,
- Focus on oral communication,
- OT translation and progress, and
- Online training and links to online resources.

These are some of the changes that have been happening and to which we're all trying to respond in the Bible translation world.

Second, I'd like to give you just a glimpse of the online resources referred to in the textbook. As we discussed earlier, SIL hosts an accompanying website of additional resources. You can access this right now, even if you don't have the book. In the book at the end of each chapter, or most chapters, there are three headings:

- "*BT4* online materials" with the names of PowerPoints and other documents you can download to supplement the information in that lesson.
- "Websites" with external links to other websites and videos. For example, there's a nice video by Dave Brunn on different kinds of translation, that you can just click on and watch.
- "For further reading" with recommended books and journal articles.

The website is experimental. We had an agreement that we'll try it for three months and then we'll review to see how it can be improved. I would like to see the site continue to be developed. There are many consultants who are much more widely read than I am, who may be able to add links for other topics. There's potential for more development.

DM: Now, Katy, if you're willing, I would like to read out some questions that have been sent in by attendees and BT list subscribers.

Andrew Persson writes,

> Dear Katy, could you comment on the influences that shaped your original approach to the training of mother-tongue Bible translators. In what ways were you drawing on the translation theories of Eugene Nida, John Beekman, etc., and on the Firthian linguistics of that time which allowed different systems to be used for different parts of a

language analysis (rather than requiring one overall system to explain everything)?

KB: When I wrote the book, I was not attempting to develop a new theory of translation. What I was trying to do was to present those principles in a way that would be understood by second-language speakers who are working in their own languages. I would say that Nida's principles have held good. I find nothing that I disagree with when I read his writings. It's more extension and, as I mentioned, insights from relevance theory expressed more explicitly. The term "meaning-based" translation that I introduced was an attempt to use common language, i.e., a term that is more readily understandable. But that wasn't a change in translation principles.

DM: What is one thing that you wish you could have included in the book but were unable to in the end?

KB: In this new edition, there are more OT examples and more references to OT translation, but more could have been done. It's an attempt, but I realise it's not all that could have been done.

Another thing about this new edition is that there is much more emphasis on reference to the original biblical text. One of the reviewers queried me on referring to source texts as being English or French. Obviously, the ultimate source text is Hebrew or Greek. We have put much more emphasis on the desirability of learning Hebrew and Greek, both for translators and for consultants. In the days when I joined Wycliffe, New Testament translation was always in focus. Learning New Testament Greek was encouraged, but Hebrew was hardly mentioned. So late in life, I'm still trying to develop my scanty knowledge.

DM: Are there any ideas currently floating around in Bible translation, biblical studies, or translation studies that you hear, and you think, "Oh, I wish that idea would just go away?"

KB: Two things come to mind. One is the idea that there's a quick and dirty solution; that you can have workshops and have a translation of the Gospel of Luke out in two workshops or even one. But quick translations without thorough grounding, careful study, and application of sound translation principles are just a waste of time.

The other thing that I wish would go away is the pressure to be quick. Again, that's something that comes out of good motivation. Administrators want to keep each programme moving steadily. They want to keep people focused on doing what they should be doing, following the agreed goals—that's good. But the goals need to be reviewed and revised. Translators should not be put under so much

pressure that they can't do their best work. I would rather have a smaller amount of good translation than a larger amount of poor translation.

DM: What aspect of the work of a translation consultant do you still find most difficult? Where do you feel your biggest blind spot is?

KB: Textual issues. We've just been checking 1 Samuel and there's one reference (1 Samuel 13.1) where the commentaries observe that this is the most difficult textual issue in the whole Bible! The challenge is how to study evidence for the alternative texts and make good judgments when there is conflicting evidence, trying to make the best choice. Fortunately, there are many good resources and there are more under development, but I would say this is still a challenging area.

I'm blessed in Mbembe that I don't have to use a back translation because of having learnt the language in the past. I can still understand, though I've lost much of the ability to speak fluently, having been out of the area for many years. Getting a good back translation is very crucial in consulting.

DM: When I encounter a particularly knotty textual issue, I take great comfort knowing that I have at least attempted something. There was a recently released version in a language of wider communication that simply made a list of all the passages that were too difficult to translate because of textual issues and then omitted them.[2] I congratulate anyone who perseveres and doesn't just omit these passages. This isn't, of course, to put into question anyone's *skopos* for their translation because translation projects require tailored approaches.

KB: There are good reference works available. The *NIV Study Bible* has helpful footnotes on textual issues that can sometimes be usefully replicated, also NET.

DM: If there is anyone who is looking to teach translation principles for the very first time and they're feeling nervous or not quite up to the task, what would you say to them?

KB: Go in and enjoy yourself. Relate to those you're trying to train. Listen to them. Be ready to share your own experience, even your own nervousness, openly. Share your mistakes and you will find that people will respond to you and will help you. You'll begin to relax and work together with them.

Also, I would mention that there's a training manual that goes along with the textbook. It has a section on suggestions for principles to apply when teaching translation principles and training translators.

DM: Yes, you've certainly given a beginning translation consultant a leg up when it comes to teaching translation principles for the first time. What a gift to have

[2] https://tips.translation.bible/story/untranslatable-verses/.

a textbook and a teacher's guide which have gone through several editions and authored by such an experienced consultant and instructor as yourself. We gratefully receive this fourth edition. For years to come, we look forward to seeing the fruit that the Holy Spirit will bring about as a result of a new generation of translators being trained—everything from Scripture portions to whole Bibles that will come about as this book finds its way into the hands of BT practitioners.

We want to thank you, Katy, for not only being a pioneer in the field of BT but helping us to pioneer new avenues of BT discussion.

LZ: This has been a wonderful privilege. God bless you, Katy. We love you.

KB: Thank you. Bless you! It's an exciting time in Bible translation. There are so many opportunities now that we never had before, so many resources, so many people involved. Now is the time to really go for it, with God's help and His guidance, to see the time when speakers of every language will have the opportunity to see—or hear—at least some Scripture in their own language. Bless you all.