Journal of Translation 17:1 (2021): 13–34
https://doi.org/10.54395/jot-hwpnd
ISSN 1558-7282
journaloftranslation.org

When Words Are Rolled into a Ball
Translating Figurative Language in Africa

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Abstract: This article examines differences between direct and indirect communication styles and describes the results of applying translation theory developed under the assumptions of the direct communication style. It discusses the role of metaphor, poetry, and proverbs in Africa, and explores the question of how indirect communication should be represented in translation.[1]

1 Introduction

Within the Bible translation movement, translators have been taught to strive for clarity, accuracy, naturalness, and acceptability (Barnwell 2020:29–30). What is meant by "clarity," however, is (ironically!) not always clear. Does it mean not introducing ambiguities and meaningless expressions, and avoiding language that leads the reader toward meanings not derivable from the source text? Or does it mean spelling out all source text meaning explicitly with the goal of making it comprehensible without effort? In practice, the latter definition tends to prevail.

Over the last few decades, Bible translators have begun to realize that the code model of communication as applied to translation—decode the source language (SL) text and re-encode using receptor language (RL) lexicon and grammar—has numerous inadequacies.[2] Several helpful books and videos have become available that explore how to apply more accurate models of cognition

[1] I am grateful to David Weber for extensive comments on this paper, and to Richard Chiabuotu, Daniel Gya, Jennifer Harper, Idris Tahiru, Robin Watson, and an anonymous reviewer for their input as well. Any errors, of course, remain my own.

[2] See Weber 2005 for a concise description of the code model and some of its pitfalls as applied to translation.

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and communication to translation (see for example Gutt 1992, Wilt 2002, Wendland 2004 and 2013, Wendland and Wilt 2008, Hill et al. 2011, Pattemore 2013a and 2013b). But on the ground, a great deal of time is still spent in teaching translators to make adjustments to certain classes of linguistic phenomena: changing metaphors to similes (or simply expressing the "point of similarity" by non-figurative language), filling in ellipses, replacing metonymy and synecdoche with direct referents, eliminating repetition, and so forth. A frequent assumption among translation consultants and in resource materials for translators is that such adjustments should be made, with little attention given to the implications in the RL. In this paper I examine some of those implications, consider the differences between a communication style valuing explicitness (which is often given a great deal of emphasis due to the number of consultants and trainers coming from societies where this approach is assumed to be normal) versus indirect communication styles I have encountered in Africa,[3] and explore how these affect translation.

2 The "make things clear" communication style

Consultants and resource materials for translators tend to put pressure on translators to be as explicit as possible. A typical example is the *UBS Translator's Handbook* entry for Psalm 76:1–3 (2–4 in Hebrew). Literally the Hebrew text says something like this:

> God is known in Judah;
> In Israel his name is great.
> His dwelling is in Salem,
> His abode in Zion.
> There he shattered the flames of the bow,
> Shield and sword and war.

TEV renders the last two lines: "There he broke the arrows of the enemy, their shields and swords, yes, all their weapons."

The *Handbook* entry categorically states, "A translation should make clear, as TEV does, that it was the weapons of the enemy that God broke; otherwise, it may appear that God was destroying his own weapons" (Bratcher and Reyburn 1991:665). That issue would make a good testing question. But notice how the

[3] Obviously there are multitudes of diverse societies within Africa. Nevertheless, in my work as a translation consultant with various African languages across language families, I have noticed themes and tendencies which are recurrent enough to suggest that there is a pattern wider than just the language communities with whom I have personally interacted.

Handbook authors make the a priori assumption that "enemy" must be made explicit. Whether or not this is necessary in the RL—or whether such an addition might in fact be wordily unpoetic in the RL—is not even considered.

Or take the *Handbook* entry on Jeremiah 9:8: "'Their tongue is a deadly arrow' is obviously a comparison equivalent to 'Their tongues are like deadly arrows' (TEV). GECL is even better: 'Their words are like deadly arrows'" (Newman and Stine 2003:256). Note the assumption: Simile is better than metaphor, and eliminating figures of speech (in this case, metonymy) is better yet. It is presented as an across-the-board principle independent of RL structures and communication styles.

Through the years, a large percentage of Bible translation consultants and writers of training materials and translation helps have come from societies where explicitness tends to be a high value. Thus, the push to de-metaphorize, fill in implicit information, and "make things clear" is sensible. In many parts of the Western world, figurative language tends to be avoided and poetry does not have the status that it has in some societies (particularly societies whose verbal art forms are primarily oral).

> In the United States it is a handicap for a candidate for high office to be known as a writer of poetry. It gives the impression that he is not enough a man of action to be a political leader... [M]odern European and American cultures give a much less significant position to poetry than it held in the world of the Old Testament. (Crim 1972)

Storti's "Degree of Directness" continuum (2017:98), on which the US rates as very direct and Africa as very indirect, has this note about societies with direct communication styles: "People say what they mean and mean what they say; there is no need to read between the lines;...people are less likely to imply and more likely to say exactly what they are thinking..." (2017:97). Within such a cultural system, it is natural to believe that spelling things out in plain language is superior to relying on something as "vague" as implicature or metaphor. Where poetry is thought inappropriate for serious discussion and indirect communication is considered "beating around the bush," the obvious conclusion for translation is that figurative language is risky and that clearer—defined as "more explicit"—is better.

Whether or not these communication standards, even in societies preferring directness, are grounded in a realistic understanding of cognition is a matter of debate. For example, Wilson and Sperber say:

> The very idea that what a speaker says should always (with the possible exception of poetry) be either literal or paraphrasable by means of a literal utterance is an illusion of folk linguistics. Western folk linguistics, at least, is committed to a code model of communication

> from which it follows that what is said should always be transparent or paraphrasable. Efforts to bring communicative practice into line with this ideal have had some effect on language use. (2012:82-83)

But regardless of how accurate the model is, the fact remains that the ideal of direct communication has entailed teaching translators to be wary of figurative language and to translate as explicitly as is reasonably possible. They are urged to fill in ellipses and eliminate repetition, and they are trained to convert figurative to non-figurative language.

3 The "roll it into a ball" communication style

A communicative tradition favoring "plain language" differs sharply from the metaphor-swaddled, provocative, implication-rich, poetically delivered communication found in large sections of the OT. Further—as many a Western expatriate has found—it clashes with African communication styles.

One phrase I often hear in Fulfulde is *Ka tamiika* 'that talk is rolled into a ball'. It means that the meaning of the message is far beyond what is explicitly encoded.

About societies with indirect communication styles—and Africa is far on the indirect end of Storti's continuum—Storti comments that "you have to read between the lines; people are more likely to suggest or imply than to come out and say what they think" (2017:97). What that of course means is that people used to indirect communication styles assume a message to mean more than is explicitly encoded, and as soon as they hear it they set to working out the full gamut of implicatures. This has unfortunate consequences for the understanding of a translation done under the make-it-all-explicit model!

3.1 Usage of metaphor in Africa

In African languages, metaphor is lavishly used (see for example Yankah 1991, Obeng 1997:56ff, Diagne 2005, Batoma 2009, and Schoeffel 2015:65). An Igbo friend in Nigeria told me that an Igbo "says nothing without beginning or ending his/her speech with a proverb or riddle" and that a proverb is called "the palm oil with which words are eaten."[4] A man from Niger once told me that saying something in simple and obvious language is "for children." An elder, a person of status, is supposed to do better than that. Being able to encode something so the hearer has to think about it to figure it out is a highly valued skill. Being able

[4] Richard Chiabuotu, p.c.

to decode is also a highly valued skill. There is an Igbo saying, "The man who needs a proverb explained to him—his mother's bride price was a waste."[5]

Particularly if the subject matter is important, obvious and clear language is avoided. This is opposite from the norm I grew up with in the US, where the more important the subject matter is, the more precise and clear the language. Such a difference in approach caused friction between a Malian friend of mine and his American colleague. One day the Malian finally demanded, "Why do you always treat me like a child?" The point of offense was that the American, whenever there was any matter of importance to be discussed, would spell everything out crystal clear. The Malian had put up with this for years, but constantly smarted from the disgrace and disrespect of it (as he perceived it). He was an adult and fully capable of working out meaning from indirect clues!

Daily conversation in Africa abounds with metaphors. Some are frozen; for example, a letter I received recently included a wish common in Nigerian English: "More grease to your elbow." Others occur as proverbs; someone commenting on a death in the village where I live quoted the Hausa proverb, *Mutuwa rigar kowa ce* 'death is everybody's garment'. Often, however, they are live metaphors invented on the spot. I heard the principal of a Nigerian Bible institute comment in regard to obtaining faculty, "PhDs are very heavy people. The ground of this place is too soft for them" (meaning that the school cannot afford to pay the salary of a PhD holder).

Recently I was talking with some Fulfulde-speaking friends in Nigeria and one of them said, about someone not present, *Umaru wartii duluuru* 'Umaru has become a whirlwind'. He of course did not mean that Umaru is literally a whirlwind, but rather that he is dangerous, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and has supernatural powers. According to the model of communication assumed by traditional translation theories,[6] the only way a listener can arrive at the correct meaning is to first check the literal meaning, reject it as unacceptable, and begin hunting for other possibilities. Yet listeners instantaneously process metaphors all the time, and psycholinguistic experiments (even with Westerners) have demonstrated that it does not necessarily take longer to process non-literal language than literal language (Gibbs 1994:109–110ff, 2002).

Why did my friend not simply say, "Umaru is dangerous. He is uncontrollable and unpredictable, and he has supernatural powers?" It is because he could say it much more briefly and dramatically by using a metaphor—and he knew he could trust us to figure out which characteristics of a *duluuru* applied to Umaru (e.g., unpredictability, association with bush spirits)

[5] Ibid.

[6] See Gibbs 1994, chapter 3, for an overview of what he terms the "standard pragmatic model."

and which did not (e.g., inanimacy, dustiness). The ideas of being dangerous, unpredictable, uncontrollable and in touch with spiritual powers are indirectly communicated—evoked rather than forced on the listener. The immediate communication context may select or highlight certain ideas more than others, but even ideas that are suggested very strongly are evoked, not stated: we could not quite nail down my friend as having asserted that Umaru has supernatural powers—after all, he never actually came out and said so. There is a cloud of impressions (in the language of relevance theory, an array of weak implicatures), and we are given an idea of the sort of person Umaru is, but the statement only encourages—does not compel—the listeners to draw certain conclusions. Saying *Umaru e woodi bawɗe ginni* 'Umaru has power from spirits' would insist on the listeners concluding that my friend believes Umaru has secret powers. *Umaru wartii duluuru* only encourages them to think so. Thus, when translators drop a metaphor in favor of explication, they are likely to misrepresent the strength with which the information was intended to be communicated—a hint becomes a strong assertion.

Sometimes it is claimed that metaphor is just a formal device which has a basic "point of similarity" with the topic, and this point of similarity can be expressed in non-figurative language; therefore, if translators think the metaphor will not be readily understood, they should remove the metaphor and simply spell out the point of comparison. The problem is that metaphors are not merely ornamental; they are vital for expressing certain ranges of meaning. A metaphor may be the only way in which the communicator can evoke all the connotations, impressions, emotions, and indirect implications (implicatures) that they intend. There is not just one point of similarity that can be expressed equally well in non-figurative language. So converting a metaphor to plain language involves loss of information. The vast shimmering array of associations is sheared off, sparing just one which the translator has judged to be the most appropriate.[7]

At a presentation I once gave on these issues, a translation consultant who was present objected, asserting that actually within a given context, every metaphor has only one point of similarity, and to claim more than that is an exegetical fallacy. While it may be true that many a far-fetched sermon has been preached by someone who imagined that every single characteristic of the image could be mapped onto the topic, the one-point-of-similarity view of metaphor is overly simplistic. As Barnwell warns, "It is not always best to make the point of similarity explicit. Sometimes making the point explicit would lessen its impact. It may also limit the meaning—often there are several points of similarity and to

[7] See Gutt 1992, particularly chapter 4, for an in-depth treatment of these issues.

make only one explicit would communicate only part of the total meaning" (2020:224).

Nida observes:

> In a sense figurative language is mind-expanding, for it stimulates a reader to see a wealth of different possible meanings and implications. In Psalm 102.11 the psalmist could have simply said "I will soon die," but how much more effective is the statement "My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass." The phrase "an evening shadow" is not only less distinct than a daytime shadow, but it is bound to soon disappear. And the figure of "withering grass" not only suggests the intense heat of conflict and hostility, but the complete lack of resources to withstand these trials. (1982:437)

Obviously much of this discussion is relevant even in societies preferring direct communication, and has in fact, been treated extensively in the relevance theory literature. I grew up in the United States and can attest to the fact that Americans use imagery too. However, in societies where indirect communication is normal and metaphor is the lifeblood of serious discussion, a translation done according to plain-language values can actually discourage reader attention because it seems childishly simple, or can, on the other hand encourage over-interpretation—because surely the authors were not so childish as to spell out what they meant to communicate![8]

3.2 Poetry in Africa

A few years ago I was talking with two translators from a Mande language in Mali, one of whom is well-versed in Arabic literature, both pre- and post-Islamic. He is passionate about poetry—the rich written tradition of Arabic and the oral poetry of his own language. He mentioned that the main characteristics of Arabic poetry are rhyme, meter, and imagery. "Imagery is crucial," he commented, "because that's what poetry IS. That is what challenges the listeners and makes them think about the meaning. It's true in Arabic and it's true in our language. If you were to take away the image and just say the thing straight out, it wouldn't be worth

[8] This issue can of course be tricky in multilingual urban contexts. Who is the intended audience? If it is people in their twenties, can they handle the verbal art forms, proverbs, metaphors, ideophones, etc., of their mother tongue, or are these being eroded by the influence of other languages? Note that losing traditional imagery does *not* mean that young urban Africans avoid imagery; new imagery is being generated thick and fast (see Kiessling and Mous 2004, especially pp. 22–24). But before and during a translation project, awareness of the actual linguistic practices of the intended audience (not the practices from thirty years ago!) is necessary in order to communicate appropriately.

the listeners' time to even bother listening. But by imagery you can say a thing powerfully and get the listeners to wrestle with your claims. Without imagery, why should they even take notice of what you are saying?"

"Yes," chimed in the other translator (who does not know Arabic but is a poet in his mother tongue). "You can say, for example, 'So-and-so is a lion.' And it is not even the same to say, 'So-and-so is like a lion.' To say it powerfully, to say it poetically, you simply use the image to represent the person."

"Now of course that's not the case in Western languages," commented the first translator. "In Western languages, people are expected to speak in concrete terms and not by metaphors."

I found their comments interesting not only because of the prime importance of imagery in their minds and their conception of metaphor as very different from simile, but also their impression that imagery is avoided in the West. Obviously, they were overstating the case—there are plenty of examples of imagery in Western poetry—but traditionally its defining features have been intricate sound patterns rather than semantic substitutions.

In Fulfulde, traditional oral poetry uses one metaphor after another, never explaining or unwrapping, but piling one image on top of another and another; or taking a single metaphor and developing it line after line. A traditional wedding song includes the following line:

Ɗam	*joodoo,*	*to'*	*ɗam*	*lalla.*
CM.liquid	stay	not	CM.liquid	spoil

'May the liquid stay, may it not spoil.'

The "plain language" meaning behind this metaphor is a wish that the marriage be filled with joy and prosperity (the liquid class marker *ɗam* is a reference to milk, evidence of a fertile herd) and avoid both poverty and divorce. However, this proposition is never stated explicitly anywhere in the song. This is typical of Fulfulde poetry: line after line of riddles, left for the listener to solve.

Admittedly, such metaphors may sound more like riddles to me as a second-language speaker than to mother-tongue speakers. Any metaphor that is part of the shared knowledge of a language community, such as the milk motif in wedding songs, may have been a riddle when it was first invented, but it was solved long ago. Nonetheless it is clear that there is a preference for expressing important ideas by metaphor—even if the metaphors are familiar—rather than as explicit propositions. Further, there is a robust tendency to invent new metaphors. Speakers of Fulfulde often coin metaphors that hearers appear to process instantly and effortlessly, and they also coin enigmatic metaphors that make the hearers glance at each other, trying to work out the meaning without requesting an explanation, and then to come up with a similarly indirect

response. The preference for metaphors—whether solved or to-be-solved—is a part of the RL communication situation that we need to engage with.

3.3 Proverbs in Africa

Much has been written about the rich corpus of proverbs in African societies, including some insightful work on translation applications in this genre (see for example Schneider 1992, Salisbury 1994, Wendland 2013:131–159). Here I want to focus on one language community's perceptions of the defining characteristics of a proverb and its communicative functions.

Before we translated the book of Proverbs into Fulfulde, the translators and I collected scores of traditional proverbs and discussed what makes a proverb a proverb in their language. They defined the principal characteristics of traditional proverbs as (1) a metaphorical or analogical base, (2) a teaching or observation about life and (3) a wide range of applications. We will consider each of these in turn.

Metaphorical base. According to my Fulfulde-speaking colleagues, the primary component of a proverb (*banndol*) is its metaphorical character. What makes it a proverb is that it expresses concepts using an image or roundabout expression that forces the hearer to ponder what hidden meanings were intended. In fact, any metaphor is referred to as a *banndol* because of the word picture that cloaks a meaning. Short, terse statements even to the point of allowing non-canonical grammar are favored. However, terse sayings that an English speaker would classify as "proverbs" are not classed as *banndi* if they are not metaphor-based; for example, *Jonnde meere waddii kuugal meere*—literally 'Worthless sitting brought worthless work'—that is, idleness engenders bad behavior. Such sayings are instead classed as *ekkitinol* 'teaching' or *vagginoore* 'warning'.[9]

Teaching about life. Fulfulde proverbs aim to teach, to encourage or discourage certain kinds of behavior, or to make an observation about some facet of life. However, the instruction is extremely compact. "A proverb is a teaching, not an explanation," one speaker told me. The use of metaphor creates a spring-loaded teaching that "zaps" the hearer with great impact by an extreme economy of words pointing to a vast array of implicatures that the hearers retrieve for themselves. It is short and sharp, and in its pithiness lies its power.[10]

[9] In English, proverbs may be metaphor-based (e.g., "It never rains but it pours") or non-metaphor-based (e.g., "Out of sight, out of mind"). Thus the defining characteristic in English is not metaphor.

[10] This may be true in non-African languages as well. See Schneider (1998:26–28) on the translation of Hebrew proverbs.

Wide range of applications. Proverbs are general enough to have a wide range of applications. One of the translators told me that in Fulfulde, "if it is a proverb, the saying is rolled up into a ball; and if you unroll it, the meaning is very wide." The metaphor is not explained within the proverb itself; the proverb is an analogy, and the user is left to apply it to life situations.

Here is a sample of some proverbs commonly used in Fulfulde. As is common with African proverbs, at first glance some of them look so obvious as to be simplistic. However, the proverb is not actually talking about the real-world scene that it describes but is a generalization about much deeper principles. Because of this, each proverb can be applied to a wide variety of situations.

(1) *Gettirɗo* *ɓoɓtidataa.*
person-who-spilled won't-gather-all
'The person who spills something will not gather it all up.'

(2) *Hesi* *fuu* *e* *pemmbol* *boɗɗum.*
new-knife every with shaving good
'Every new knife shaves well.'

(3) *Baatal* *irtoyii* *remergo.*
needle dug-up hoe
'A needle dug up a hoe.'

(4) *Kooli* *junngo* *pottidataa.*
fingers hand won't-be-equal
'The fingers of a hand will not be equal.'

(5) *Ɓokki* *rimii* *nyaande.*
baobab bore itchiness
'The baobab bore itchiness.'

Suppose in translating one of these proverbs into English, you decide that one of them—say (3), *Baatal irtoyii remergo*, is an image that will not communicate to your hearers. You decide to choose one of the non-figurative interpretations and translate that. So you render it as "A small offense turned into a huge fight." Fine, that is a legitimate interpretation of the proverb in some contexts, and it makes the saying easily accessible to uninitiated readers. However, it cuts off the possibility of a deeper and richer understanding, of exploring wider ramifications of the proverb. The meaning "Curiosity caused a disaster" would be disallowed, but the original proverb is used with that meaning too.

Or take (5), *Ɓokki rimii nyaande*, which is based on the observation that although the baobab has almost silky-smooth bark, its fruits are covered with irritating, itchy fuzz. In some contexts, the meaning of this proverb is "A fine

man had a nasty son." So, do you base your translation on that meaning? If you do, it does not apply to the situation of a good teacher turning out bad students—but speakers do use the original proverb for describing that situation as well. Fulfulde proverbs are very broad in scope.

Some proverbs lend themselves a little more to non-figurative generalization; for example, it would probably be possible to cover most or all usages of (2), *Hesi fuu e pemmbol boddum*, by saying, "Someone or something new may seem wonderful at first, but in the end be no better than what you had before." This may be true, it may be insightful, but it is not memorable. The genius of Africa's oral wisdom literature is in vivid snapshots that make a teaching unforgettable.

4 In translation, whose communication style do we apply?

4.1 Pick one application and translate that…or not?

Ecclesiastes 11:1 contains this terse proverb: "Send your bread on the surface of the waters, for after many days you will find it." In Arabic literature there is a similar saying that seems to be talking about the results of generosity, and the traditional Jewish interpretation is also that this verse is talking about generosity (Ogden and Zogbo 1997:392). However, some commentators think it refers to foreign trade, and others take it to be about making investments. Egyptian literature contains a similar saying that seems to refer more generally to good deeds (Walton 2009:513).

So, which does this verse mean? Well, who says it has to mean only one of them? Like Fulfulde proverbs, it could be applicable to a wide array of situations, with the meaning varying according to the situation.

After long discussion about how to translate it, one team in Nigeria decided to translate the metaphor as a metaphor, leaving the reader to explore the array of possible interpretations. But this is what the consultant report said about the rendering:

> This literal translation is meaningless, and this cannot be justified with reference to the difficulty in interpreting the original (contra HBK[11]). The team must choose between the various interpretations discussed in HBK: generosity (which seems to me convincing), foreign trade, investment, etc.

This necessitated another lengthy team discussion. The mother-tongue translators were opposed to choosing only one interpretation. One of them said,

[11] UBS *Translator's Handbook*.

"If we just pick one meaning, we have cut off all the other possibilities. This is a proverb with a very broad application. You can apply it to sharing with others. You can apply it to planting your maize instead of eating it up right now. You can apply it to international commerce. But if we just pick one application and translate that, then we have no more proverb and only one narrow statement."

A further problem with de-metaphorizing was cultural. Saying things in a roundabout, cloaked, imperspicuous way is highly valued in their society. People do not just make plain statements if there is any possible way to make a riddle of the statement so that the listener will have to think carefully to figure out what is meant. The wiser one is, the more one is expected to speak in enigmas; and the more didactic/hortatory the discourse is, the more metaphor one employs. In fact, a survey of natural texts revealed that in narrative, the use of imagery is somewhat economical, but as soon as the moral or some sort of evaluation is reached, the metaphors come crowding thick and fast. To substitute plain language for the figure would remove the impact and in fact make the statement not worth pondering.

The first consultant's comments were discussed with another consultant, and the second consultant's reaction was, "No, no, NO! When will consultants stop pressuring people to kill the power of the text?" This question is particularly crucial in societies where important information is commonly communicated by metaphors and proverbs. Sitting in business meetings conducted in Fulfulde, I have been struck by what a huge amount of the discussion consists of metaphors, one after another. We have to be careful in our translations that we do not trivialize Scripture's message by presenting it simplistically.

4.2 Using RL metaphors

I want to be clear that I am not saying the answer is to translate literally. As Beekman and Callow's classic work (1974) demonstrated, there are plenty of cases in which a SL metaphor is meaningless or carries wrong meaning in the RL. But we should be slow to simply discard figurative language, especially in societies where people expect that any speaker worth taking seriously will word a message in a way that has to be grappled with. We should actively search for ways to use the figurative language available in the RL to convey the meaning of the text. If we believe that Scripture is God's message—and most people in the Bible translation movement do—we should put the RL's best into translating it. There will be places where, if we are to avoid miscommunication, we may have to use non-figurative language. We should, however, try hard to find appropriate RL figures to convey the meaning of the SL figures, and in some texts in which

the SL actually uses non-figurative language, it may be more appropriate in an African language to use a figure.[12]

In Fulfulde, an example of rendering an SL metaphor by a (different) RL one is in 2 Samuel 11:25, where King David says, "Like this one and like this one the sword eats"—in plain language, "Being killed in war can happen to anyone." This plain-language rendering is followed in several meaning-based English translations.

A literal rendition of this metaphor in Fulfulde would have communicated little or nothing to the hearer. Swords just do not eat in Fulfulde. However, by analogy to a common saying, *Mayde walaa esiraawo* 'death has no in-law', we put *Kaafahi walaa esiraawo* 'the sword has no in-law'. The intent of this statement is of course not that a sword has no in-laws (that is certainly true, but hardly relevant). The personification of the sword as having no in-laws and therefore no-one that it must be careful to respect/avoid is interpreted accurately by Fulfulde-speakers because of a vast cloud of cultural knowledge and associations with the similar proverb that is often quoted when death is discussed. When the Fulfulde metaphor is substituted for the Hebrew metaphor, not only does the correct meaning come through, but it also sounds much better for King David to say it this way instead of in flat, plain language. A person of his status is expected to be creative and speak well, not just blurt out the unadorned and obvious.

Another example is Proverbs 4:16. The second line, speaking of evildoers, says literally, "their sleep is plundered unless they make someone fall." Sleep can be "plundered" in Hebrew and "robbed of sleep" works in English, but not in Fulfulde. The UBS Handbook states, "In languages where 'rob' or 'steal' are not used in this way, it will be necessary to use an expression of the meaning in plain terms; for example, 'They are unable to sleep unless they have made...'" (Reyburn and Fry 2000:107). But will it actually be "necessary?" Before settling for something colorless, we should at least look for something vivid. In this case, when we looked for metaphors associated with sleeplessness, we ended up with the rendering "their eyes dry out *rayaw* [ideophone] unless they make someone fall." This has a vividness that is far beyond that of a plain-language rendering.

[12] My colleague Richard Chiabuotu pointed out that in the Nigerian languages he speaks, emotionally charged topics like death or freedom are discussed in figurative language, because non-figurative language "feels too feeble to hold the weight." Thus it is important for a translator to be aware, in a given RL, which topics are normally handled with figurative language.

4.3 A proposal: ease up on the direct communication campaign

I believe that as translators, project advisers, consultants, and trainers we should develop a healthy caution about de-metaphorizing. Yes, we should communicate the meaning of the original. But we should not do so in a way that sounds cheap or childish. Yes, it is often necessary to explicate. But our eagerness to do so should be tempered by the realization that explication can actually distort the meaning of the original text. Here are two principles I believe we should bear in mind as we translate, consult, mentor, and teach: (1) avoid imposing a single interpretation on an open-ended text, and (2) look for ways to utilize the riches of the RL.

4.3.1 Keep in mind that explicitation imposes limitations on the message

When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" or "Don't cast your pearls before swine," did he intend to convey a proposition that could be instantaneously converted to a single non-figurative meaning in the hearers' minds, or did he intend to provoke them to ponder and explore the many implications and applications of those statements? Advocates of the single-point-of-similarity view will have a hard time coming up with the one-and-only way in which Jesus is like light, since light in the Jewish context represented life as opposed to death, prosperity (Omanson and Noss 1997:210), joy (Fishbane 2002:305, Sarna 1989:7), safety (Walton 2009:293), divine favor and blessing (Bratcher and Reyburn 1991:46, 843), justice and deliverance (Sarna 1989:7), God's side as opposed to Satan's (Harrison and Abegg 2009:70), provider of insight (OT wisdom literature—note in particular Psalm 119:130 and Proverbs 6:23), and so on.

A speaker using a very direct communication style frames his message so as to leave the hearer only a narrow range of available inferences; this results in a very precise meaning being conveyed. In indirect communication, the speaker frames his message so as to allow the hearer a great deal of latitude in making inferences, resulting in a cloud of associations or several possible interpretations.[13] As one translation consultant has pointed out (Weber 2005:58), this latter approach is the one Jesus took most of the time. He made people

[13] In relevance theory, such direct communication is referred to as "strong implicature(s)" (because the speaker explicitly asserts his propositions) and indirect communication is referred to as "weak implicature(s)" (because the speaker evokes rather than asserting). See, for example, Sperber and Wilson (1995:199–200, 221–237). Note that "weak" does *not* mean lacking force or impact! Communication involving weak implicatures is often far more loaded, far more forceful, than communication involving strong implicatures. This is true even in English, as the relevance theory literature demonstrates in great detail.

stretch to understand. He invited them to think about who he really was, but he often opted not to say it straight out. He did not coerce the hearers; he made provocative statements and asked leading questions to help them infer the answers. It may be tempting to translate the Gospels by putting Jesus' words in simple, clear, precise terms, but this can actually distort the historical facts and undermine his communication strategy. Philosopher Dallas Willard highlights the didactic power of Jesus' approach, observing that Jesus' use of logic

> is always enthymemic [leaving at least one premise unstated], as is common to ordinary life and conversation. His points are, with respect to logical explicitness, understated and underdeveloped. The significance of the enthymeme is that it enlists the mind of the hearer or hearers from the inside, in a way that full and explicit statement of argument cannot do. Its rhetorical force is, accordingly, quite different from that of fully explicated argumentation, which tends to distance the hearer from the force of logic by locating it outside of his own mind. Jesus's aim [is] to achieve understanding or insight in his hearers. This understanding only comes from the inside... It seems to 'well up from within' one. Thus he does not follow the logical method one often sees in Plato's dialogues, or the method that characterizes most teaching and writing today. That is, he does not try to make everything so explicit that the conclusion is forced down the throat of the hearer. Rather, he presents matters in such a way that those who wish to know can find their way to, can come to, the appropriate conclusion as something they have discovered—whether or not it is something they particularly care for. (2011:124–125)

Large sections of Scripture take this indirect approach to communication and altering the communication style should not be done lightly. As Schneider points out:

> Certaines ambiguïtés voulues—notamment par l'usage du langage figuratif—doivent parfois être respectées, par exemple dans la traduction des proverbes, car de telles 'obscurités' maintiennent la porte ouverte à une pluralité de lectures et d'applications valables, ce qui est le propre du style gnomique.[14] (1998:27)

Wendland is more emphatic, pointing out that meaning-based translations all too often

[14] "Certain desirable ambiguities—particularly by the use of figurative language—should sometimes be respected, for example in the translation of proverbs, because such 'obscurity' keeps the door open to multiple understandings and valuable applications, which is characteristic of wisdom literature."

> fail to do justice to the Proverbs and sapiential discourse in general by clumsily applying conventional restructuring techniques such as disambiguation, coupled with frequent syntactic transformation or semantic generalization in the over-zealous defense of semantic clarity and readability. To be sure, the resultant text turns out to be very understandable—almost too easy at times. In addition, all too often certain crucial aspects of a distinctive proverbial nature get washed out in the simplification process—not only the seasoned, memorable style, but also the power of a proverb to stimulate further reflection, deeper meditation, a search for some solution, or a new perspective on things. (2013:158)

This indirect approach that pulls the audience into unpacking a tightly-wrapped ball of meaning is in fact "a defining characteristic of poetry" (Weber 2005:56). Sperber and Wilson (2012:118) define "poetic effects" as "cognitive effects achieved by conveying...a wide range of weak implicatures." This does not mean we should avoid rendering strong implicatures present in the SL text. It means we should recognize that emotion, memorability and impact often are tied up with weak-implicature-exuding figures of speech. Literary art requires imagery, because "it is the range and the indeterminacy of the implicatures which gives the metaphor its poetic force" (Pilkington 2000:102). This is true even of languages spoken in societies toward the direct communication end of the continuum. How much more is this an issue when translating into languages spoken by people who value indirect communication, as is true in many parts of Africa! We should strive to keep indirect communication as indirect communication. We should be especially careful in approaching poetic passages. It may be tempting to simply "discover the meaning" and re-render the text in plain language, but this destroys the poetry. Certainly, one can translate just the meaning, overhauling metaphors as non-figurative language and filling in all the implied words that the writer trimmed out of the grammar as he crafted his observation into poetry instead of prose. But what emerges is flat and dull—so different from the sparkling original! What gives poetry its special luster is the stating of a truth in a strange new way, one that makes the hearer think, one whose meaning is swaddled in an unusual wrap and needs the hearer to unwrap it to find it. If we merely provide an explanation, it is prose, not poetry—and probably not very good prose at that. A Nigerian friend once told me that one can gauge how "serious" a message is by whether the delivery is "serious"—by which he meant delivered via metaphors and proverbs. This should give us pause in how we translate what we believe to be the most serious message of all time!

4.3.2 Look for ways to utilize the riches of the language

The gold-mine of idioms, ideophones, and colorful expressions available in African languages should be accessed to communicate the message of Scripture with the power and beauty it deserves. The Hebrew Psalms and prophets showcase incredible care and skill and literary virtuosity. We may be less talented, but at least we should aim to do them as much justice as possible.

Sometimes, as my colleagues on the Fulfulde translation team are in the throes of trying to express some Hebrew term in their language, I have heard them say things like, "We don't have an expression like that." "We can't say that." "We don't have any synonyms for this," and so forth. On the spot, it is sometimes difficult even for a mother-tongue speaker to come up with a really good equivalent. One thing I have found very helpful is creating a list of semantic domains, constantly updated as I hear people conversing. (Another useful data source is the RL text corpus of songs, stories, sermons, debates, etc., collected for discourse analysis.) The list includes all sorts of conceptual domains: anger, beauty, lying, skinniness, and so on and so forth. Any term I hear, metaphorical or non-metaphorical, goes under the appropriate domain. So, when a translator says, "We don't have a way to say that he was angry other than 'he was angry,'" a quick look at the list offers twenty-nine other possibilities.

A list of ideophones is also highly valuable. The intensification patterns typical in Hebrew poetry are not always easy to recreate. Most African languages have a wealth of ideophones, and sometimes an ideophone offers just the vivid intensification needed.

Ellipses should be handled carefully. Implicit information that perhaps should be supplied in narrative may militate against elegance in poetic texts, even to the point of stunting the impact of the passage.[15] We need to study RL poetry and proverbs, noticing what types of ellipsis are used and what types avoided (Is there verbal ellipsis? Ellipsis of subjects? Objects? Ellipsis of larger units?) and how else speech is pared down to the vital essence. The results of these observations should then be reflected in our translation of such genres.

Let's rein in the automatic reflex to convert metaphors to similes, and instead seriously consider which is best in each case, based on RL norms. Although metaphors and similes are blithely equated in some translation

[15] As Wendland observes, "While the operation of implicit => explicit tends to be more common, it may also be necessary for certain material that was explicit in the biblical text to be implicit in the TL, for example, redundant information that would make the translation sound unnatural or even obscure due to all the detail. This is especially true in poetic discourse, in which brevity of expression often produces greater impact" (2004:231n).

manuals,[16] actual research not only backs up the Malian who said the real power is in a metaphor, but also shows that at least in some cases, the hearer's interpretation of a metaphor is not the same as the interpretation of the corresponding simile—the meaning is actually different (Glucksberg and Haught 2006).

Obviously, it is crucial to render metaphors in a way that communicates the correct meaning. And obviously there are many metaphors that do not transfer between languages. However, systematic de-metaphorizing produces very flat texts, stripped of power and vividness. The SL metaphors are eliminated and few or no RL ones are introduced. Training programs should drill translators not in converting figures of speech to non-figurative language, but in finding appropriate RL figures of speech to convey the source text meaning. Do they in fact know how to research their language's verbal art forms, and is time budgeted into their translation schedule to allow this? The expertise of local poets and storytellers should be sought. As always, testing of a proposed rendering is necessary to make sure that the translation is communicating the correct meaning.

As a voice from the literary translation world observes, "Art must be rendered as art, otherwise it is no longer art" (Hofstadter 1997:557). Even in English, readers have noted that although TEV does well in being clear, it is rather a flop in poetry. One commented that Moses' song in Exodus 15 loses the majesty of poetry and comes out sounding like prose—in fact "like the newspaper" (Gardner 1991:21). In a society that places relatively small value on poetry and rhetoric, this is perhaps not so serious (though it does give the wrong impression of the Bible's literary quality). But in an oral society, where subtle and poetic communication is a highly developed art and expected of those who are wise, such an approach to Scripture translation sabotages the importance and preciousness of the message.

5 In conclusion—some questions

A cultural preference for plain language as opposed to figurative speech has exerted significant influence on the Bible translation movement. But is it not time to re-think it—particularly in those parts of the world where the stuff of deep thought, the essence of wisdom, the teachings of parents, and the debates of chiefs are one vast torrent of imagery? If, as my African friends tell me, making a claim in simple and obvious language is "for children," are we trivializing the

[16] For example, Larson (1998:271) says, "Metaphors do not have the word *like* or *as*, but they are also comparisons that can often be rewritten as similes...[Examples of some metaphors.] Notice that these could just as well be said as similes."

message by forcing the text to be more explicit than it originally was—simply because our translation model tells us that simple and obvious is superior? Are we making the patronizing assumption that Africans will not be able to process metaphors properly? Are we eliminating what the RL audience recognizes as poetry—imagery—and producing a sort of gloss of the original that is no longer a poem? And if so, is that really translation?

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