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Why Consider Local Genres in Translation?

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Abstract: A growing number of scholars and practitioners in Bible translation recognize the importance of considering local genres, although leading textbooks devote relatively little attention to this topic. In the meantime, many practitioners are unsure how to explore local genres effectively, while others doubt the value of doing so. This paper outlines a process for identifying and working with genres. Evidence both from the translation world and from other fields of study shows that genre awareness enhances translation quality, reception, and the translation process itself. The final section of the paper addresses potential challenges related to genre-level translations, providing suggestions for navigating the use of genres in different contexts.

Introduction

Genealogies. Laments. Prophetic oracles. Building plans. Songs of praise. Fictional didactic stories. Historical accounts. Letters. Sermons. These genres and more fill the pages of Scripture—a rich, colorful collection of communication in myriad styles and forms.

From a literary perspective, the notion of genres in the biblical texts has been well attested (e.g., Alter and Kermode 1990; Ryken and Longman 2010). A handful of scholars and practitioners in the Bible translation world have suggested—and demonstrated—that rendering passages in comparable genres of the receptor culture can have a remarkable impact. These authors have written on the power of the Psalms in local genres (e.g., Boerger 2016; Dickie 2022; Salisbury 2015; Wendland 2017; Zogbo and Wendland 2020) and on the effectiveness of local-style proverbs for wisdom sayings from the Old Testament (e.g., Salisbury 2014; Unseth 2006) and New Testament (e.g., Pluger 2015). Wendland (2011) and Wilt and Wendland (2008) have addressed the subject more

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comprehensively, providing resources and vision for matching the wealth of biblical genres with comparable genres in receptor cultures.

Likewise, the third entry of the "Basic Principles and Procedures for Bible Translation" from the Forum of Bible Agencies International gives this mandate:

> To preserve the variety of the original. The literary forms employed in the original text, such as poetry, prophecy, narrative and exhortation, should be represented by corresponding forms with the similar communicative functions in the receptor language. The impact, interest, and mnemonic value of the original should be retained to the greatest extent possible. (FOBAI 2017)

Despite this growing awareness of the importance of genre-level considerations, leading textbooks in the Bible translation world (e.g., Barnwell 2020, Larson 1998) spend relatively little time on the topic. When I have broached the subject, most translation teams, advisors, and consultants have expressed uncertainty regarding how to identify appropriate genres, translate faithfully within them, and check the translations for accuracy. Most have also expressed doubt that the results could possibly be worth the effort.

This paper addresses these concerns by sketching in broad strokes a possible process for identifying and working effectively with genres (section 1) and presenting evidence for the myriad ways by which genre awareness can improve the quality of translations, their reception, and the process of translation itself (section 2). I also address various challenges and concerns involved in working with genres (section 3). The theoretical and practical insights presented here come from a wide variety of sources, drawing not only from publications within the Bible translation world but also from other fields that consider genres, such as cognitive linguistics (e.g., Nikiforidou 2019), psychology (e.g., Obermeier et al. 2013), translation studies (e.g., Biel 2017), emotion studies (e.g., Inselmann 2016), academic writing (e.g., Bruce 2008), and ethnoarts (e.g., Schrag 2013).

1 Identifying and Translating Genres

Given the wide range of understandings and uses of the term "genre" in various applications, this section begins by establishing a working definition of the concept, including some factors involved in identifying genres (section 1.1). Thereafter, I cast a broad-strokes vision for the process of translating across genres (section 1.2), with the understanding that much more could be said to expand upon and nuance these suggestions further.

1.1 Identifying genres and their features

As used in this paper, "local" or "familiar" genres refer to emic distinctions for different kinds of communication recognized by a community. These genres may originate specifically from the culture itself or may have entered the culture from outside influences, but they are known on some level by people within the culture.

Each genre is marked by a bundle of features that makes it distinct from other genres within the culture—not just linguistic features (Bruce 2008:130–131), but also performance conventions and all kinds of spiritual, social, and other associations. Schrag (2013:60, 268) provides a concise definition: A genre is "a community's category of communication characterized by a unique set of formal characteristics, performance practices, and social meanings." These emic perceptions go well beyond the notional etic discourse types suggested by Longacre and Hwang (2012:35–39). Rather than focus simply on linguistic elements, these perceptions also include "social, communicative, cultural, cognitive and ideological factors" (Biel 2017:157).

Clearly, there are different levels of genres. In many cultures, we can distinguish very broadly between prose and poetry. At the other end of the spectrum, we can seek a high level of granularity in identifying genres. For example, we could do a very close analysis of proverbs in some cultures and find patterns allowing us to classify different types of proverbs beyond what language users would consider functional distinctions. For the purposes of this paper, I am simply referring to the level of genres recognized by a community as functionally distinct from others. If people have different words for a category of communication and recognize them as fulfilling different functions, then they are different genres.

For the purposes of Bible translation, three practical considerations may be helpful in identifying and distinguishing this level of genre:

1. **Themes**: Identifying the acceptable or most common topics, messages, attitudes, and emotions, including the truth value of the content (fact or fiction).
2. **Discourse features**: Determining ways of chunking the text, the resulting sections to be expected, conventions for effecting transitions, marking peak or other points of emphasis, tracking participant reference, and any other features influencing the flow of information in a text.
3. **Aesthetic features and expectations**: Evaluating literary and performance features such as word play, sound play, rhyme, line length, word density, or, in oral contexts, the use of gestures, intonation, or other vocal features. Naturally, some of these aesthetic

features may operate with discourse functions, such as effecting transitions or providing emphasis.

From this perspective, the Bible contains a wealth of genres, representing a variety of cultures and communication types and ranging from just one verse in length, such as individual proverbs, to many consecutive chapters, such as the long stretches of historical narrative found in the books of Kings and Chronicles. As such, multiple genres may appear within one book, such as the legal-style arguments, oracles, laments, and other communication types found in the book of Ezekiel (Frost and Harper 2022; Biblical Literature 2023). Likewise, one chapter may contain more than one genre, such as the combination of historical narrative with multiple songs found in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

It is worth noting that, in living cultures, genres may exhibit some level of flexibility. For example, American proverbs feature succinct, pithy, memorable, one-sentence statements, but the techniques that make them memorable may vary widely: sound play such as alliteration or rhyme ("birds of a feather flock together"); parallelism and repetition of key words ("when life gives you lemons, make lemonade"); or simply strong imagery ("don't count your chickens before they hatch"). Schrag (2021:146–151) accounts for this kind of variability by distinguishing between *malleable* elements, which can shift, and the *stable* elements undergirding each performance or other instantiation of a genre. In the case of American proverbs, conciseness remains a stable element, while the specific linguistic techniques employed are malleable. Healthy genres exhibit this tension as creators and performers stretch the boundaries (innovation within malleable elements) while working within parameters that remain recognizable to their audiences (sedimentation of the stable elements) (cf. Ricoeur 1984).

1.2 Translating across genres

Since the exact features even of very similar genres vary across cultures, translating biblical passages will necessitate translating from one genre into another. Wilt and Wendland (2008) promote the careful consideration of genres in translation, and Wendland (2004, 2011) lays out the "literary functional equivalence" (LiFE) translation methodology in other resources for translators. Wendland (2022:1) considers this translation strategy "a methodological extension, or practical application of de Waard and Nida's 'functional equivalence' approach (1986)". This section provides a general outline for translating across genres, building on the work of Wendland and others in functional equivalence.

Fundamentally, translation teams will draw from an inventory of the genres available in their culture, with the end goal of matching appropriate genres from their repertoire with the functions required for the colorful variety of genres in the original scriptures. Some teams may wish to build this inventory of available genres from the outset of a project, while others may wish to explore possibilities as they encounter new genres in the Bible.

Matching genres effectively will involve considering a number of factors. One of the primary considerations for choosing an appropriate genre revolves around the *themes* noted in section 1.1. Based on their exegetical understanding of the biblical pericope under consideration, translators will want to identify genres well suited to the same topics, attitudes, and truth value. In cultures with a rich variety of options, translators may also need to evaluate the level of aesthetic richness for various genres. For example, a culture may have a variety of options for expressing lament, ranging from less-ornamented prose to more-ornamented poetry, the latter of which may better suit the highly emotive nature of one of David's lament psalms. In some cases, "it is possible for there to be a complete mismatch between two literary traditions" (Zogbo and Wendland 2020:85). For example, some cultures use epic poems for recounting narrative, historical events. To translate from original prose into poetry, or vice versa, may seem like quite a stretch,

> pushing the notion of dynamic, or functional equivalency to the limit, but it is a question that needs to be asked in cultures where such oral poetry is a major means of communication, and where people expect certain types of information to be conveyed in a particular genre. (ibid.)

Translators must also evaluate their inventory of receptor-culture options based on a number of anthropological considerations that may affect the intended use of their translation. For example, a genre typically only sung by women in the presence of women may be well suited for some purposes but not ideal for corporate worship with mixed genders. The factors listed below derive largely from Schrag's (2013) lenses for genre analysis (step 4, 59–190) and comments on vitality (258–259), and Zogbo and Wendland's suggestions for choosing genres wisely (2020:74–75):

1. Appropriate settings (places, times, or occasions) for a genre (e.g., only within family homes, primarily at harvest season, only in sacred spaces, only in the evening, or as part of initiation rites).
2. Who creates and performs a genre (e.g., only males, only experts, only individual performers).
3. A genre's vitality within the culture (e.g., valued as part of the culture's identity, still exhibiting a strong sense of malleable elements, rarely

used, considered foreign yet commonly used and appreciated, cf. Harris 2017:109–113).

4. Instruments, props, and other materials required for an instantiation of a genre.
5. Any other spiritual, social, or other associations people commonly have with a genre.

Having successfully identified an appropriate receptor genre, translators can then analyze the formal features of that genre, focusing on salient discourse and aesthetic features, as mentioned in section 1.1. Translators must not only identify the relevant features of the genre but also understand how each feature may contribute to the meaning of a text. Likewise, they may discern that some aesthetic features simply facilitate enjoyment and cultural-identity connections with the material. Translators will also benefit from identifying which features function as stable or malleable within the genre, allowing them to prioritize the inclusion of the stable elements.

Translators will also need an understanding of the discourse and aesthetic features in the biblical pericope, after which they can proceed with translating the function of those discourse features into the functionally equivalent discourse features of the receptor genre. For example, the peak of the original text will now be marked using the peak-marking conventions of the receptor language. In most cases, the exact feature of the original will not transfer, but rather a feature of the receptor genre will carry out the original feature's function. For the Moloko people of Cameroon, ideophones mark "strategic places in narratives" (Friesen et al. 2017:115), appearing especially at the peak (121). When crafting the story of Jesus calming the storm (Matthew 8, Mark 4, and Luke 8), the translation team needed to include onomatopoeia at the peak, evoking the sound of the waves, in order for the story to come to life for their community checkers (Petersen 2008).

Likewise, aesthetic features that contribute to meaning will be converted into the conventions of the receptor language. For example, in biblical Hebrew, Ecclesiastes 1 features a series of wonderful sound effects, but not every language can accommodate the use of fricatives for wind and phonetic liquids for water. Zogbo and Wendland, translation consultants with expertise in translating poetry, advise translating poetic devices like these with functionally equivalent devices in the receptor language (2020:90–112, 202–207).

Any aesthetic features in the original that do not contribute to meaning and are not easily transferrable can be dropped without consequence. As compensation, genre-appropriate features may be added into the translation to recreate the level of aesthetic richness of the original, such as adding extra

internal rhymes to gain a poetic effect—as long as the added features do not interfere with the meaning.

In the purest forms of such genre-level translation, the original and translated pericopes might appear quite different in terms of order of information and other discourse and aesthetic features, depending on how closely the original and receptor genres overlap. Regardless of these surface differences, the emotive and cognitive impact for the receptor audience should be similar to that of the original audience, or at least much more accessible than if the genre-level considerations had not been translated. As de Waard and Nida note (1986:26), "The form will almost never be identical with the form of the source text, but one can usually produce what is a functional equivalent, since language functions are universals."

Depending on a variety of constraints, translators may choose to translate only a limited number of discourse or aesthetic features into the receptor language, either retaining or dropping the others altogether. Sometimes translators may opt to give their audiences access to some of the original literary features while still giving them an aesthetically rich experience by using elements familiar to the receptor culture. Zogbo and Wendland (2020:89–90) particularly recommend this approach to allow the audience to "experience the essence of the poem in the original language". Translators can often provide their audience with the overall "feeling" of a receptor genre by engaging just one or two of its most commonly recognized, stable features. These kinds of decisions rest largely on an assessment of an audience's needs, as discussed further in section 3.3 below, and must be supported with careful community testing.

2 Quality-Related Motivations for Considering Genres

Several quality-related motivations emerge from appeals for the use of familiar genres in translation: (1) the increased quality of translations in terms of faithfulness to the original texts (section 2.1); (2) the improved reception of translations in communities (section 2.2); and (3) a more enjoyable and potentially more efficient translation and Scripture Engagement process (section 2.3). These observations come from the literature of the Bible translation world, but also from the work of scholars who consider genres from the perspective of other disciplines. Under each of these three points, further subsections present a variety of dimensions by which an appropriate use of genres supports the quality of translations, their reception, and the translation process itself.

2.1 Faithfulness to the original

When it comes to the question of accuracy, awareness of genres unlocks new levels of meaning, allowing translators to increase their fidelity to the meaning of the original text. This increased fidelity emerges from several different angles: clarifying the semantics and pragmatics (2.1.1), capturing the meaning inherent in the ordering of information (2.1.2), rendering emotional content appropriately (2.1.3), and communicating the aesthetic impact (2.1.4). Taken together, these areas of meaning certainly support the mandate that "the impact, interest, and mnemonic value of the original should be retained to the greatest extent possible" (FOBAI 2017).

2.1.1 Interpreting semantics and pragmatics

Kroeger (2022:9–10) explains that hearers derive understanding through knowing three aspects of communication: what speakers actually say (the words themselves), what they intend to communicate (implicatures, or unspoken meaning), and what they are trying to accomplish with their communication (speech acts). Since genre rules partially govern the second and third categories, the choice of genre influences the semantic and pragmatic implications of any utterance. For example, the statement "God has done marvelous things" takes on one character when presented as the refrain of a song, with an intention of praise through the speech act of worship, but another character when serving as the thesis statement for a theological exposition. Translators who understand the influence of the genre on the original text can increase the accuracy of their translations by conveying those elements of meaning, whether through genres that support those meanings or through other functionally equivalent devices.

2.1.2 Ordering and prioritizing information

Part of a genre's conventions includes both where and how it orders and highlights information. Rendering translated information in the receptor genre in the expected order, with appropriate conventions for showing priority, provides a more accurate interpretation for the recipients.

With regard to ordering information, the predicted order of units in a text provides some level of efficiency for people processing the information but may also help them understand the function of the content. For example, in the Western world an academic dissertation generally begins with a statement of the problem and a review of the extant literature before reporting a researcher's methodologies, results, and conclusions. Should scholars manage to publish such work without the standard categories, or with the results first and the problem statement and literature review last, they would likely encounter a

great deal of consternation, as readers would not be able to process the information efficiently and might not be sure how to interpret the unconventional presentation of material.

Translators who understand the function of the units in the original text can seek to present those units in an order that will be processed efficiently and accurately by those in the receptor culture. For example, some cultures have a strong preference for processing events in chronological order. John Stark recounts such a situation with the Kambari language in West Africa: the translation team needed to deal carefully with the flashback of 1 Samuel 9:15–16, where God alerts Samuel to Saul's impending arrival. Moving this information earlier in the story, right after Saul began looking for his father's donkeys, helped listeners follow when God had the conversation with Samuel.[1] The sixth of the FOBAI (2017) principles also notes the importance of reordering when necessary.

Genres use a variety of techniques for prioritizing information, ranging from the linguistic or performance factors involved in peak marking to the placement of the highlighted content. For example, in the Western world, the refrain of a multi-verse song generally features a thought considered worthy of greater reflection. The hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" probably would not have survived so many generations had the refrain simply focused on "summer and winter". Similarly, we have some evidence that the chiastic structures of biblical Hebrew texts gave the content in the middle of those forms some level of priority. Translators can provide a more accurate rendition of the text by placing such content in recognizably prioritized positions in the receptor genre.

2.1.3 Rendering emotions

Emotions must be interpreted not only in light of their broader cultural norms, but also in light of the genre in which they appear. Scodel and Caston (2019:110) note how different genres in ancient Greek and Roman traditions aroused different expectations regarding emotions. Writing about biblical Hebrew, Linafelt (2016:91) suggests that narrative forms provide relatively few glimpses into the internal life of characters, while poetic passages feature much more emotionally laden content. Inselmann (2016:543) notes:

> Emotions and passions appear in different genres and concepts of texts. In this context, they serve specific purposes, functions, and expectations in connection to their specific form. Therefore the form is an important framework that always has to be taken into consideration when analyzing passions in biblical times.

[1] John Stark. Personal communication, 2023.

Such differences among genres extend beyond ancient times, with each culture and context developing its own conventions. As Rauchle (2019:84) explains:

> In interpersonal communication, we rely on verbal and non-verbal expressions (i.e. words, tone of voice, gestures, postures, facial features) to convey and read internal emotional states. These "emotion codes" are not universal but shaped by display rules, that is, culture-specific prescriptions about who can show which emotions to whom, when, and, most importantly, how. In the representation of emotions in the arts, these "emotion codes" are again modified in accordance with the possibilities and limits of the respective artistic genre and its iconographic or literary conventions. Thus, when we deal with the representation of emotions in literature and art, we deal with a "double coding of emotions."

These kinds of codes form as we engage with others and "typical patterns" of communication emerge, creating "norms by which audiences respond emotionally" (Cairns 2019:8). As a result, emotional content must be considered in light of its cultural context, including the genre in which it appears.

As a practical example, the positive emotions and polite greetings found at the beginning of some types of letters in the New Testament may simply have been what was expected, rather than an intense expression of joy. Exegetes must "decide from one case to the next how the behavior expressed should be interpreted, dependent on the literary genre" (Inselmann 2016:543). It follows that an accurate translation will convey the emotional impact appropriately according to the conventions of the receptor genre.

2.1.4 Communicating aesthetic value

Obermeier et al. (2013:8) found that meter and rhyme in German poetry led to a "heightened aesthetic appreciation and intensity of processing as well as more positive emotional responses". They suggest that such aesthetic and emotional evaluations occur "independent of semantics" (7). If, as they claim, "stylistic and structural devices such as meter and rhyme influence aesthetic and emotional responses to poetry" (8), then accurately translating texts with high aesthetic value, like Hebrew poetry, requires incorporating features that impact the intended audience aesthetically as well. At the very least, as Barnwell (2020:14) states, "many 'common language' translations could be improved if translators give attention to appreciating the beauty and impact of the original text and to exploring ways in which this can be effectively reproduced in translations, looking especially at larger units of text."

2.2 Improved reception of translations in communities

Case studies from practitioners around the world provide examples of how the skilled use of familiar genres has positively affected a translation's reception in a culture. This section identifies common themes that may explain the success of presenting Scripture in such familiar packaging: establishing expectations for communication (2.2.1), reducing cognitive load (2.2.2), providing a gateway to the emotions (2.2.3), appealing to cultural identity (2.2.4), and integrating material into people's life patterns (2.2.5). A practical example or two introduces each new theme, followed by insights from a wealth of disciplines that consider genres in their research.

2.2.1 Establishes expectations for communicative intent

In one West Asian context, a translation team produced a small book of fifty proverbs, containing forty-three local proverbs and seven from the wise prophet Solomon. During community checking, one woman noted with satisfaction that the ant is a "hard-pulling creature", so of course any wise man would send people to look at this kind of creature. Her response was indicative of an increased awareness and respect for the words of Solomon in the community, creating an eagerness to hear more of his wisdom.[2] De Ruiter (2011) similarly makes a strong case for why proverbs appeal in so many contexts, noting, among other points, that a proverb is seldom contested and is seen as a way to honor the wisdom of the past.

Genres are already associated with certain types of meaning within a societal structure, providing an open door through which to share concepts. Social genres possess a regularized, purposeful use within a specific context. They are a socially accepted avenue for communicating certain types of information to certain audiences (Bruce 2008:132). The features particular to a genre activate a frame for interpreting the content, providing "readers/listeners with certain expectations about a text and also a strategy for its interpretation" (Wendland 2011:160). For example, genres help people interpret the text by setting their expectations for the text's purpose, how it will unfold, and when they have reached the end. As noted by Fillmore (1982:117), "such expectations combine with the actual material of the text to lead to the text's correct interpretation" (cited in Nikiforidou 2019:548).

From a cognitive linguistic perspective:

> Genre is essential if we wish to take into account the (cognitive) expectations of language users when they engage in a particular class

[2] Tina Hall (pseudonym). Personal communication, 2017.

> of language use.... [L]anguage users never do any processing of language *in vacuo*, but always in some concrete situation, and they will have more or less detailed cognitive models and expectations about such contexts. I believe that the most important notion for the analysis of these cognitive models and expectations is the one of genre. (Steen 2002:185, 187–188, cited in Wendland 2004:102)

2.2.2 Reduces cognitive load

After seeing little to no response to Scripture from the Digo people in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania, Mwana Hadisi (2012:450) worked with a local artist to produce the story of Noah in the local *rome* genre of oral narrative. Hadisi notes that the genre features, especially the aesthetics of the performance, contributed to the story's success, but he also claims that those features made the material easier for Digo listeners to understand.

Closely related to the first theme of establishing expectations, familiar communication patterns reduce cognitive load by activating well-established processing strategies, thereby reducing the overall processing cost and making it possible for people to absorb new concepts more easily. According to Wendland (2017:79), "Genre in effect acts like a 'program' that gives artistic shape to a literary text and conceptually arranges its constituent details into an identifiable, more readily processed arrangement."

Perhaps even more significantly, genres support people in pressing through difficulties and unknowns to look for meaning. For example, when readers knew a text was poetry, they looked for "additional, hidden significance" in sentences that initially struck them as semantically incongruent (Blohm et al. 2017:11, 13). In other words, people are willing to work harder to give a message the benefit of the doubt when it is in a genre they recognize.

Likewise, knowing the genre of the text seems to cue the correct grammatical register for readers, making it easier for them to process otherwise difficult archaic language (Blohm et al. 2017:12). Genres even license grammatical constructions that are otherwise unacceptable in the language (Nikiforidou 2019:550–562). For example, Nikiforidou notes that conversations often allow "distinct conventions" that other genres would not (558). In English, recipes feature lists of commands without reference to a subject (550–551). Play scripts in English also license unique constructions such as "Enter Romeo and Juliette" (552). Other languages, such as Japanese (564) and Greek (548–549), likewise allow special grammatical constructions in particular genres.

2.2.3 Provides a gateway to the emotions

Nyemuse (a pseudonym), working with Congolese refugees in the Central African Republic, tells of watching the people sit silently, expressing no emotion,

for days on end. Finally, when they were invited to express their grief in the style of their traditional laments, the emotions came pouring out, providing a starting place for processing the pain and trauma they had experienced.[3]

As forms of communication with known expectations that can be processed relatively easily on the cognitive level, familiar genres provide easier access to the emotions than foreign forms of communication. In fact, aesthetic elements may even activate the emotions. As already noted in section 2.1.4, Obermeier et al. (2013) found that the aesthetic features of German poetry increased the engagement and positivity of people's responses. In other words, associations already established with genres can pave the way to touching people's emotions. Atkins (2021) goes so far as to make a case that local genres touch people in ways that allow for heart transformation and even shifts in worldview.

2.2.4 Appeals to cultural identity

In Central Asia, a nationally renowned singer agreed to record a series of Scripture songs produced by a songwriting team. Afterwards, whenever the singer would take requests at his concerts, people asked for these new songs. Despite the fact that the religious context did not generally tolerate mention of the Son of God, even the song based on the first few verses of Hebrews 1 remained a favorite, as audiences expressed delight at hearing fresh compositions in their beloved cultural song forms.[4]

Likewise, in accordance with Middle Eastern practice, the translation group Al Kalima believes that "beautiful content should be expressed in beautiful forms" (Al Kalima home page). To this end, the *True Meaning* translation (Diab et al. 2017) of the Gospels presents the genealogies in Matthew and Luke not only as regular text, but also in the form of beautiful, local calligraphy. Likewise, the songs of Luke 1 are presented in poetic lines, as lyrics fitting the culturally recognized genre *nasheed*. The group has also produced a collection of Psalms in modern Arabic poetic style (Ouahaibi 2016). While many Arabs hesitate to read the Bible because of social and religious prejudices, these beautiful artistic products have met with a positive response. People enjoy reading them and sharing them with others.

In other words, genres appeal to people's cultural identity, drawing them to engage with beautifully crafted examples. Fresh instances of genres associated with the group's identity will pique members' interest, drawing attention to the new material. In this vein, Boerger (2016:200) builds on Adegbija's (2004:127) discussion of cultural "identification tags" to make a case that indigenous song forms help strengthen group identity. Likewise, Green

[3] Personal communication, 2017.

[4] Paul Kuivinen. Personal communication, 2015.

(2007:28) draws from Klem, noting that characteristics of African oral art are "vastly important because the art of oral communicators is a symbol of their cultural identity and ethnic cohesion. The orature itself is important in promoting cultural values and social control (Klem 1982:102–103)".

2.2.5 Integrates material into established life patterns

Working with the Kambari Language Project in Nigeria, Stark (2011:71) discovered that familiar oral genres supported people's encounters with new terms and concepts, lending neologisms a high level of cultural acceptability: "Listeners are in familiar territory, the only new element is the intended usage of the neoterm." Significantly, the new terms did not spread effectively when left up to "natural" retellings of the stories, but only after the stories were promoted through established literacy classes and other training opportunities (69). Stark concludes (72):

> The apparent failure of the 'natural' approach to dissemination of religious terms could easily be rectified by utilization of various existing infrastructures in the community: Bible schools, Sunday School teacher training, annual district-wide meetings, and special ministry workshops for religious leaders instantly come to mind as available mechanisms for encouraging oral terminology dissemination.

Genres are connected with institutions and people's social roles within a community (De Vries 1999). Given an already recognized place in society, new instances of a genre are easily integrated into the already established rhythms of the culture and, if done well, draw people to return to them over and over, thereby becoming part of the group narrative and increasing the chances of long-term impact. As Green (2007:26) explains from Vansina, oral art functions within institutional frameworks, so "both genre and content are related to the occasion (Vansina 1985:95). Every message has a purpose and a function (Vansina 1985:100)". Likewise, Green (ibid.) gives an example from Klem (1982:114–118) of the role of Yoruba praise songs in "celebrations of life and memorializing the dead".

2.3 People and process-level benefits

Moving beyond considerations of the quality of the text and of its reception in the community, a few authors have also addressed how rendering Scripture in familiar genres also increases the quality of the process. The following subsections explore benefits for the translators (2.3.1) and some potential advantages from a process efficiency standpoint (2.3.2).

2.3.1 Benefits for the translators

Several scholar-practitioners explicitly note benefits for translators when working with familiar genres. Dickie (2017:265) found that local people, though previously untrained in translation, developed a greater sense of engagement and ownership of Scripture when given the opportunity to create songs and poems in Zulu: "It is clear that many young Zulu-speakers today would be open to an artistic communication of the Psalms, and would value the experience of engaging with the text themselves and making it their own." She suggests that this level of interest and appeal will extend to other biblical genres and to other languages and cultures.

Salisbury (2015:16) writes even more explicitly about how much trained translators enjoyed translating the Psalms through singing. He reports:

> Many translators expect that if they have already found it difficult to translate prose, then translating poetry will become an almost unbearable burden. However, participants at workshops I have run in Africa, the South Pacific, Central Asia and southern Asia have said in amazement and joy: "We didn't know that translating could be so much fun!"

Salisbury (2015:17) also notes the power of a positive atmosphere and the opportunity for translators to get into a creative flow. He suggests: "If the translators are having fun, becoming engrossed and absorbed by the poetry of the Psalms, then it becomes so much more likely that their hearers will also enjoy engaging with their translated Psalms."

2.3.2 Matters of process efficiency

Several factors play into a discussion of the efficiency of genre-based translations. On the one hand, composing within genres allows for "ready application" (Dickie 2022:8), with minimal additional investment required for Scripture Engagement. If artistic liberties have been taken, teams can create translations relatively quickly through a round of exegetical tightening, producing natural and appealing texts that have had the "poetic flavour (*sic*)" in the "cooking" right from the start (Salisbury 2015:4, 14). As Dickie (2022:8) notes, "it is much easier [efficient] to add accuracy to a text than to add creativity."

On the other hand, translating within the constraints of some genres may require specialized skills not cultivated by everyone in a language community. As a result, someone familiar with creating within the genre may be able to work with great efficiency and delight, while for someone unfamiliar with the genre, the process may require significant extra time and effort, proving inefficient and possibly blocking forward movement altogether. My own experience

leading small groups of American millennials through translating biblical poetry suggests that eager, skilled creators can create beautiful renditions in just a few hours' time. In the end, the short-term net efficiency for a project depends greatly on the capacity of the creators involved.

Translating poetry can be arduous (Salisbury 2015:17), but a discussion of efficiency must also consider the value of a long-term investment. Consider the Punjabi poetic translations of the Psalms. Their creation took the poet Shahbaz twenty-six years (1890–1916) but resulted in songs still sung today, more than a century later, even by non-Punjabi speakers. These Psalms are said to have created unity across denominations, given non-readers in the lower caste access to Scripture, and made the Psalms the most familiar, accessible biblical passages in Pakistan (Salisbury 2015:9). Similarly, the centuries of use afforded the Scottish Metrical Psalter (McDonald and Johnston 2012) give testimony to the possible longevity of accurately translated, aesthetically pleasing, high-quality products.

3 Challenges, Concerns, and Considerations

Consistently incorporating genre awareness into the translation process brings a fresh set of complexities and challenges. This section explores a number of these issues, including the extent to which genres affect the translation process (section 3.1), the availability of genre-level exegetical resources (section 3.2), the suitability of genres in different contexts (section 3.3), the evaluation of genre-based translations (section 3.4), and the possible bounds on translating Scripture into other genres (section 3.5). Posed as questions, these topics and the initial perspectives presented here invite further conversation within the translation world.

3.1 How much do genres affect the translation process?

If translating across genres is indeed as important to the quality of translations as suggested by the evidence provided in section 2, the implications reach far and wide within the Bible translation world. From training and resource development to the translation and distribution of Scripture itself, genres thread through nearly every aspect of the work. For example, those involved in creating exegetical resources need to provide information on the thematic, discourse, and aesthetic features of the original text, along with their corresponding functions, as noted in section 1.1 above. Such resources will serve as the basis for teams doing their initial drafting but also for the teams and consultants checking their work. Likewise, training for translators, translation advisors, translation consultants, Scripture Engagement workers, and other

related language-project personnel will need to include a significant emphasis on genre-level awareness.

For each individual translation project, those involved in planning discussions can decide at the *skopos* or project-brief level the extent to which genre considerations will be incorporated into the translation process. Ideally, the initial stages of the project will budget time for conversations eliciting an inventory of the culture's genres and their associated features, so as to establish a starting point for matching pericopes, as described in section 1.2 above. Those needing to do language and culture learning will want to include getting to know the community's forms of expression as well as seeking out the people who create and perform them (Schrag 2013:1–22). Language learning will include the intentional collection and exploration of different genres of communication, as Unseth (2008) demonstrates with proverbs, and the inclusion of discourse and genre-related inquiries during work on linguistic analysis.

Those involved in organizing the exegetical materials for translation teams must attend to the themes, discourse, and aesthetic considerations of the biblical text. Similarly, translators and translation advisors must take the time to understand the literary features and their functions in the receptor genres. Incorporating genres also affects personnel choices, as people already familiar with creating within the respective genres often provide additional energy and expertise for working within the constraints necessarily imposed by different text types—poets or songwriters for poetry, storytellers for narrative, and so forth (cf. section 2.3.2). As Barnwell (2020:14) states, "Translation is not a mechanical process, following rules, but a creative art! More could be done to identify members of the translation team and reviewers who are gifted in expressing themselves well."

Peer, community, and consultant checks will also include genre considerations. The community may require some explanations regarding the translation team's intentions in using local genres, especially if people are familiar with other forms of Scripture. Beyond the traditional comprehension and accuracy evaluations, which may detect some discourse and aesthetic issues, peer and community checks must also focus on the impact conveyed by the various genre-related features. For example, those involved in checking can solicit feedback regarding the attitudes and emotions being conveyed in a passage, its perceived truth value, points of emphasis, overall enjoyment, memorability, and acceptability to the audience. Consultants can use the lists of features highlighted in the exegetical resources, combined with comments from the translation team about how those elements have been captured in the translation, to confirm that the thematic, discourse, and aesthetic functions of the original text have been rendered appropriately in the receptor genre.

Genre considerations also impact final production, from the quality of oral performances to the formatting and presentation of written materials. In addition, products must be distributed via media appropriate to the respective genres. From start to finish, genre awareness influences nearly every aspect of the translation task.

3.2 Do we have the exegetical understanding and resources we need?

This question raises an issue of confidence, the realization that producing accurate translations depends on accurate input. The number of sources already referenced in this paper provides evidence that both scholars and practitioners are becoming increasingly aware of and are exploring the textual issues relevant to genres and translation. Some commentaries and other biblical research attend to one or more related matters. Among others, for example, Van der Lugt (2006–2013), Fokkelman (1998–2004), and Wendland (2017) provide valuable insights into the structural and aesthetic features of the psalms, while Garland (2011) includes discourse considerations in his exposition on the Gospel of Luke. Logos Bible Software also provides basic information that can serve as a starting point, such as literary typing and Longacre-based genre designations for each passage (Thompson 2016).

To my knowledge, we do not yet have comprehensive sources on these matters. A working bibliography or relevant resources on each book of Scripture might serve as a beginning measure. Let this situation serve as a call for more research and publication of resources to serve the translation world in identifying the themes, discourse, and aesthetic features required for accurate and effective literary, genre-based translations.

In the meantime, the witness of section 2, describing all the ways by which attention to genres impacts the quality of translations, suggests the importance of starting with whatever insights are already available. Even the most basic questions exploring primary text types can prevent the kind of fact-fiction confusion Barlaan (1977) encountered, thus ensuring that translations are presented in receptor-culture text types compatible with the material. Many formal majority-language translations provide enough clues to identify macro-functions such as: peak in narrative; emphasis through techniques like repetition in non-narrative; section shifts reflected by changes in topic, emotion, or participant reference; and important connections within the text between related words, lines, or sections. Simply translating these macro-functions will greatly increase the impact of the material for the audience.

3.3 Are genres always the right choice?

This topic may be viewed from two angles: (1) Is using familiar genres the right choice for the translation team, that is, do they have the capacity to handle them well? (2) Are genres the right choice for the intended audience?

While the first point is a real question for many teams, especially as genre considerations have not been a standard part of training and production, the motivation to learn more and address this area will come from the confidence that the effort is worth the investment. In addition to the quality-related benefits already outlined in section 2, teams and stakeholders must consider the issue of the suitability of a genre-based translation for any given audience.

One of the most productive approaches for answering this question lies in the intended use of the translation. Nord (2018:46–50) provides a useful spectrum between documentary translations, which serve to give audiences insights into the way the source culture communicated, and instrumental translations, which serve to fulfill the same communicative functions as the original text, but using communication devices familiar to the receptor culture. In other words, if a translation is intended to serve as a reference point for accessing the original Hebrew and Greek structures, the text should retain more source-culture conventions. If, on the other hand, a translation is intended to pique people's interest and draw them into the material, the text should be presented with more receptor-culture conventions. Where resources allow, two versions will support both goals—one "study version" retaining as many of the features of the original text as possible, thus allowing for deeper understanding of the original culture and context, and a second "local version" presenting the historically accurate material within natural communication conventions for the local context.

Producing two versions can also ease the tension communities may feel between wanting a version which helps them connect with Scripture more easily and wanting a version that looks and feels like other translations they know, such as those in a nearby majority language. Where resources initially allow for only one translation, a more accessible, genre-based version, coupled with carefully selected paratextual explanations addressing text types, discourse, aesthetics, and any other apparent differences, can provide the audience with confidence in the new presentation. Programmers can also design websites and apps that show the links between material in the new version and the equivalent material in other versions.

Two additional spectra, addressing missiological and linguistic perspectives, can further nuance the discussion of suitability for an audience. From a missiological standpoint, it may be worth prioritizing some passages and initially rendering them with receptor-culture genres and communication

conventions. As suggested by the reasons outlined in section 2.2, these kinds of translations can help facilitate people's first interactions with new material. Other passages may be reserved for later treatment, translated according to the needs of the audience at that time.

From a linguistic perspective, a spectrum of possibilities should also be considered. The final paragraphs of section 1.2, on translating across genres, already hint at the differences between more extensive and more constrained levels of incorporating genre-related features. Likewise, the final paragraph of section 3.2 mentions some possible simpler approaches. In each case, decisions about the best approach can be made by those involved in the project.

3.4 How do we measure if our genre-based translation is good?

Measuring the quality of genre-based translations can still begin with the "CANA" principles already applied broadly throughout the translation world: the translation must be clear, accurate, natural, and acceptable to the audience, as established both through careful consultant checks and community testing (see the end of section 3.1 for more details). As explored in section 2.1, the translation of genre elements can actually increase *accuracy* to the message of the original text, communicating elements of meaning derived from the form that would otherwise be lost. Well-crafted translations will also communicate *naturally* and *clearly*, understood by the intended audience without a high risk of misunderstanding. The question remains whether such genre-based translations, which may look different from other versions, will be *acceptable* to the recipients. This point of measurement introduces two poles of possible difficulty. On the one hand, audiences may reject genre-based translations as not looking or feeling like Scripture. On the other hand, they may accept the material too readily, erroneously believing it is simply part of their own culture and missing the additional import carried by divine communication. Such reactions of inappropriate acceptance or outright rejection suggest the translation philosophy has been taken too far, a matter which will be addressed in the next section.

3.5 How far is too far?

Within the wide variety of needs, desires, and creativity exercised by communities desiring God's Word in ways that speak to them, I suggest two "boundary markers" outside of which a translation has been taken too far: historical grounding and sacred authority. As with every aspect of the translation process so far discussed, an evaluation of these criteria can come only through feedback from the intended audience.

In terms of historical grounding, the presentation of Scripture must convey a sense of connection with another place and another time, where people of another culture walked out the events and emotions in the text. In other words, translations need to remain secondary texts, maintaining "ties with the primary biblical worlds of the source texts" (De Vries 1999, section 5; see also the fourth principle of FOBAI 2017). House (2017:90) provides helpful terminology with her comments on overt (vs. covert) translations. Overt translations allow people from the receptor culture to "eavesdrop, as it were, i.e., be enabled to appreciate the original textual function, albeit at a distance," a distance created not only by time passed but also by the original's positioning in a different context. Ultimately, House claims, we can only reach "second-level functional equivalence" by co-activating the frames and discourse worlds of the original text and of the receptor culture (ibid.). The appropriate use of familiar genres should strengthen rather than impede this co-activation process and the receptor audience's appreciation of the original text's functions. The matching of thematic, discourse, and aesthetic features, as suggested in this paper, keeps translators focused on a "linguistic" rather than a "cultural" translation:

> Quite naturally one cannot and should not make the Bible sound as if it happened in the next town ten years ago, for the historical context of the Scriptures is important ... In other words, a good translation of the Bible must not be a "cultural translation". Rather, it is a "linguistic translation". (Nida and Taber 1969:12–13, quoted in Kirk 2005:92)

The successful historical situating of the text paves the way for the second criterion of communicating an aura of sacred authority. The intended audience must be able to tell that this is not just general, human communication, but that this material comes out of communication between humans and a divine being—and not just any divine, but a God who comes with supreme authority. Each context will require careful consideration of all the factors involved. In some cases, linguistic register may play a crucial role, as seen with the protests around the Tamil Bible (Israel 2011). In the world of American worship, Christian rap, hard rock, and heavy metal provide some evidence that the power of biblical content combined with excellent artistry can shift a profane genre towards the sacred, allowing for deeply meaningful engagement for those who are comfortable with the original genres.

Conclusion

As with many aspects of translation, the specifics of working with genres will differ according to context. This paper has outlined some foundations for how working with genres can support effective Bible translations, including a

number of ways genre awareness can contribute to the quality of translations, their reception in communities, and the translation process itself. The final section explored a variety of considerations around using familiar genres in translation. Ultimately, I hope this paper will serve as a call for workers in the Bible translation world to develop this topic further, to press forward with making genres a more consistent part of training, resource development, community engagement, and the translation process itself. In light of the benefits presented here, may it speedily become standard practice for project leaders and translation teams to explore their community's genres thoroughly as they "make an informed decision about what kind of translation will meet their needs" (Kirk 2005:101).

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