BIBLE TRANSLATORS AS ARBITERS OF AMBIGUITY
PART I
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   Translators perform a significant and necessary role in making the Tanakh personally accessible, since most people read and know it only in their native languages. People who read the Tanakh in translation are most likely not aware of the myriad linguistic decisions the translator of a given version has made on their behalf in coping with the meanings of certain words, idioms, or ambiguous passages. This article will deal only with how translators serve as arbiters of two types of textual ambiguity, pronominal and phrase. It will identify exemplars of textual ambiguity and present samples from an array of selected English translations in order to illustrate the ways translators have dealt with these two types of ambiguity. It will then raise points about the role of translators vis-a-vis pronominal and phrase ambiguity.

   Any word or term is ambiguous when it may have at least two meanings. Pronouns, such as "he" and "they," may be ambiguous not in meaning but in regard to the person or persons to whom they refer. Phrases may be ambiguous not only in meaning but also in regard to their association or construction. One contemporary hypothetical example will suffice to illustrate both kinds of ambiguity: "The parents saw Sam and Jan while walking along the riverbank. They asked, 'Are you going home?'" The two sentences are ambiguous in that the reader does not know the referents for the pronouns "they" and "you," and does not know who was walking along the riverbank.

   As exemplars of pronominal ambiguity in translating the Tanakh, let us consider Genesis: 18:15; 34:31; 44:22; and 44:17. As exemplars of phrase ambiguity, let us consider Genesis 34:7, II Samuel 1:23, and Ecclesiastes 9:10. The various translations to be cited below are identified in full at the end of this article.

TEXTUAL PRONOMINAL AMBIGUITY
   Translators deal with pronominal ambiguity in four different ways:
 (1) Maintain the textual ambiguity, (2) resolve the ambiguity, (3) avoid the ambiguity,[1] or (4) create their own ambiguity. They can use various devices. The samples of translation that follow will illustrate what translators can do

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and how they can do it. An exemplar of pronominal ambiguity arises in Genesis 18:15, where Sarah, in fear, denies before God and Abraham that she laughed upon hearing that at age ninety she would soon give birth to a son. The verse ends with a brief clause that rebukes Sarah for her denial.[2] Let us begin with three translations of that part of the verse.

   1. KJV[3]:   *And he said, 'Nay, but thou didst laugh.'*

   2. NRSV: *He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'*

   3. JPS: *And He said: 'Nay, but thou didst laugh.'*

While there is no substantive disagreement about the meaning of the rebuke, differences do exist among these three translations.[4] The key one concerns the ambiguous pronoun "he." The KJV does not capitalize the pronoun "he" when referring to God. (See Genesis 1:5 where "he" first appears and with a lower-case "h." The pronoun there can only refer to God.) This "he" maintains the ambiguity of the Hebrew text, in that "he" here can refer either to God or Abraham, who are both present at the scene. The NRSV does capitalize "He," but still maintains the ambiguity because the capital "H" is at the start of a new sentence. Therefore, "he" can refer to either God or to Abraham.

The JPS uses the very same words as the KJV but spells the pronoun "He" with a capital letter in the middle of the sentence. It thereby follows a different convention in English from the KJV, one that calls for the capitalization not only of such words as God, Lord, and Creator but also their appropriate contextual pronouns. With its translation the JPS has made a decision for the unsuspecting reader -- that God, not Abraham, rebuked Sarah for her behavior. The JPS has resolved the Tanakh's ambiguity and has done so without ever giving any indication to the reader that the Hebrew text is ambiguous. One single capital letter makes a significant difference.

Consider a fourth translation that goes beyond capitalizing the indefinite pronoun "he."

 4. DOUAY: *But the Lord said, 'Nay; But thou didst laugh.'*

Here, too, the translator, without any indication of doing so, has decided who rebuked Sarah. This translation goes beyond the Hebrew text by using "Lord" rather than the pronoun "he."

The above four samples of Genesis 18:15 illustrate that a translator can maintain textual pronominal ambiguity or resolve it. The meaning of text is

quite different if God rebuked Sarah or if Abraham did so. (Whereas God is explicitly identified in some translations by a capital "H" or the word "Lord," Abraham is not explicitly identified in any translation I have seen.[5]) Religious, cultural and marital concerns arise in this exemplar of pronominal ambiguity. Given the setting of Genesis 18, a reader might well consider a rebuke by God acceptable but not one by Abraham. Or vice versa. These translations also illustrate that a translator can use different devices to maintain or resolve pronominal ambiguity.

The following translations of the ambiguity in Genesis 34:31 and 44:22 illustrate what else a translator can do with pronominal ambiguity. Genesis 34:31 follows a long verse in which Jacob rebukes his sons Simeon and Levi for their behavior in defense of their sister, Dinah. The rhetorical question of v. 31 ends the story of the Rape of Dinah. Samples 5-12 translate that verse differently.

   5. NKJV: *But they said, 'Should he treat our sister like a harlot?'*

   6. NIV: *But they replied, 'Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?'*

   7. ROSENBERG: *But they answered: 'Should he just seize our sister as a whore?'*

The NKJV maintains the ambiguity of both "they" and "he" in the Hebrew text. The NIV also maintains the ambiguity of "he," but by its translation of "replied" for the Hebrew "said" implies that "they" refers to Simeon and Levi. Whereas various people may "say" something, it is generally the case that only the addressees (in this case explicitly identified as Simeon and Levi) "reply" to a rebuke. The Rosenberg translation maintains the ambiguity of "they" (only implying that it refers to Simeon and Levi), but decides that "he" refers to Shechem. It does so not by explicitly substituting *Shechem* for "he" but by using the word "seize." In Genesis 34:2, where the text indicates that Shechem "took" Dinah, Rosenberg uses "seized." The Rosenberg translation reads: *It was then Shechem saw her -- he was son to Hamor, the local governor – and seized her. Lying with her, her guard was broken.* Thus, by using the word "seize" again in verse 31, this time for the Hebrew "take," the Rosenberg translation decides for the reader that the referent for "he" is Shechem rather than Jacob or Hamor, the other two apparent possibilities.

Other translations cope with the textual pronominal ambiguity in Genesis

34:31 not by maintaining or resolving it but by doing something else.

  8. REB: *They answered, 'Is our sister to be treated as a common whore?'*
  9. NAB: *But they retorted, 'Should our sister have been treated like a harlot?'*

The REB and the NAB, through their use of "answered" and "retorted," imply that Simeon and Levi are the referent for "they." However, they avoid the ambiguous "he" by changing what "they" said into the passive voice. These translations do not simply and completely avoid ambiguity via use of the passive voice. Because the passive voice by its very nature does not indicate who treated the sister as a whore, the REB and the NAB create their own ambiguity. The result is that in a sense they also maintain the textual pronominal ambiguity. These two translations, like those that resolved ambiguity already noted above, give no indication that the Hebrew text has an ambiguous "he."

   The indirect maintenance of ambiguity of "he" by the REB and the NAB is different from the direct maintenance of the NKJV and the NIV. The latter maintain ambiguity by staying grammatically close to the Hebrew text which explicitly indicates a person, albeit ambiguously, who performs the action of the verb "treat." The former, by substituting the passive voice for the Hebrew text's active voice, imply that the Hebrew, too, uses this avoidance device. That is to say, all maintained ambiguities are not the same.

   Three other translations do something further in regard to the Hebrew text of Genesis 34:31:

  10. TYNDALE: *And they answered: 'Should they deal with our sister as with a whore?'*
  11. GNB: *But they answered, 'We cannot let our sister be treated like a common whore.'*
  12. JPS: *And they said: 'Should one deal with our sister as with a harlot?'*

   Both Tyndale and the GNB, while implying that Simeon and Levi are speaking, create their own ambiguity by introducing the pronouns "they" and "we," which are not in the Hebrew text at all. Tyndale and the GNB do so without giving any indication of the referents for the pronouns they use. In the Tyndale translation, what combination of characters constitutes the referent for "they." In the GNB translation, do Simeon and Levi constitute the "we"? Or is "we" all the brothers? Or is "we" the entire tribe of Israel?

The JPS introduces "one," another and different indefinite pronoun. Though singular in number, "one" is broader than the pronoun "he" in the Hebrew text. "One" represents people in general, much like the pronouns "anyone" and "everyone"; "he" refers to a specific person. The Hebrew text refers to a male person.[6]

In Genesis 44:22, Judah is speaking to Joseph. In attempting to save Benjamin from becoming a slave (servant) to Joseph, Judah recounts the events of the brothers' trip to Egypt:

13. ALTER: *'And we said to my lord, The lad cannot leave his father. Should he leave his father, he would die.'*

14. DOUAY: *'We suggested to my lord: The boy cannot leave his father; for if he leave him he will die.'*

15. KJV: *'And we said unto my lord, The lad cannot leave his father; for if he should leave his father,* his father *would die.'*

Alter maintains the ambiguity of the Hebrew text with all of its pronouns, especially "he" in *he would die*. The Douay substitutes its own pronoun "him" for the text's *his father*. This substitution creates even more ambiguity. In any case, the Douay, too, maintains the Hebrew text's ambiguity for the referent of the last pronoun. The KJV resolves the ambiguity of who will die by deciding that it is the father, not the lad. However, by using a different typeface for "his father" at the end of the verse, the KJV indicates that it has gone beyond the Hebrew text. Thus, the reader at least is alerted to the fact that the translation is not literal, and the text on who will die is in some way altered.

The following translations of Genesis 44:22 all differ in some particular way from the three above.

16. JPS: *'And we said unto my lord: the lad cannot leave his father; for if he should leave his father, his father would die.'*

17. NJB: *'We replied to my lord, The boy cannot leave his father. If he leaves him, his father will die.'*

18. BIRNBAUM: *'But we told my lord, The boy cannot leave his father; his father would die if he were to leave him.'*

The JPS resolves the ambiguity with the same words as the KJV, but without indicating to the reader that it did so. The NJB and Birnbaum resolve the ambiguity of who will die, but create their own ambiguity about who leaves whom.

In summary, the above 18 samples of translation of the Tanakh illustrate how translators can maintain, resolve, or avoid pronominal ambiguity. The samples also illustrate how translators, in dealing with textual ambiguity, can create further ambiguity through their translations, as well as how translators can indicate through the use of an alternate font that they are adding something to the Hebrew text.

REVERSE PRONOMINAL AMBIGUITY

One other aspect of pronominal ambiguity deserves some attention. Translators must also cope with the possibility of creating reverse pronominal ambiguity. There is an exemplar of potential ambiguity in Genesis 44:17, where Joseph responds to Judah's offer that all the brothers will become slaves (servants) to Joseph. Let us consider four translations of the last part of Joseph's rejection of Judah's offer, where Joseph expresses his desire that only Benjamin remain in Egypt and the rest of the brothers return home to Canaan to be with Jacob.

19. TYNDALE: *'. . . but go ye in peace unto your father.'*
20. SPEISER: *'. . . but the rest of you can go back to your father without hindrance.'*
21. FOX: *'. . . but you -- go up in peace to your father.'*
22. NJB: *'. . . . but you can go back unhindered to your father.'*

Tyndale and Speiser reflect the Hebrew text's use of the second person plural pronouns "you" and "your." Tyndale, whose translation dates from the year 1530, had no trouble in using "ye" to indicate the plural. Speiser, restrained by the lack in English of a common modern pronoun for the second person plural, uses the term "rest of you" to avoid reverse ambiguity that would result by using only the unmodified pronoun "you."

Fox and the NJB, by using only the common modern pronoun "you," unfortunately introduce ambiguity into their translations where none exists in the Hebrew text. The reader of these two English translations does not know to whom Joseph referred. Was it only to Judah, who had just spoken to him in the previous verse, or to all of the brothers? The result of this reverse ambiguity in the FOX and the NJB is that the reader is left with the question: Are "you" and "your" singular or plural?" That is to say: Who should go home to Jacob?

In summary, when a resolution of pronominal ambiguity is offered, or when avoidance language is used, the translator has made a decision for the listener and reader. Most often, the translators do not indicate what they have done. The meaning of a verse changes with each decision made by the translator, and the resultant change makes a difference in terms of identifying, for example, who rebuked Sarah or who will die if Benjamin is separated from Jacob. The change strongly affects the reader's understanding of the text.

NOTES

1. Avoidance of the Hebrew text's ambiguity in essence maintains ambiguity but in a different sense, as the samples of translation below will illustrate.

2. I encourage readers who know Hebrew to consult the Hebrew text of this verse and each subsequent verse cited.

3. An alphabetical list of abbreviations and their identifications appears at the end of this article.

4. I shall not comment on the various samples of translation except in regard to the issue of pronominal and phrase ambiguity, the focus of this article.

5. Abraham is identified as the rebuker in some commentaries, including those by Nachmanides, Sforno, and Chaim ben Attar, an 18th Century Moroccan commentator now accessible in English through a 1995 translation of his work. See the commentaries of H. Freedman in the *Soncino Chumash* ed. by A. Cohen (Hindhead, Surrey: The Soncino Press, 1947) p.88, *Mikraot Gedolot* on Genesis 18, and Chayim ben Attar in *Or Hachayim*, Vol.1 (Jerusalem: Eliyahu Munk, 1995), p.165.

6. Note that the NJPS, by using the passive voice, revises the JPS and avoids the pronoun he in the question asked, just as the REB and NAB above do. The NJPS reads: "Should our sister be treated like a whore?"

FULL NAMES AND DATES OF TRANSLATIONS CITED

ALTER: Robert Alter, *Genesis* (1996)

BIRNBAUM: Philip Birnbaum, *The Torah and the Haftarot* (1983)

DOUAY: *Douay-Rheims Version* (Catholic, (1609), 1941 ed.

FOX: Everett Fox, *Genesis* (1983); *The Five Books of Moses* (1995).

GNB: *Good News Bible* (The Bible in Today's English Version) (1976).

JPS: Jewish Publication Society (1917)

KJV: King James Version (1611)

NAB: *New American Bible* (1986)

NIV: *New International Version* (inclusive language edition) (1986)

NJB: *New Jerusalem Bible* (1985)

NKJV: *New King James Version* (1989)

NRSV: *New Revised Standard Version* (1989)

REB: Revised English Bible (1989).

ROSENBERG: David Rosenberg, *The Book of J* (1990)

SPEISER: E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (*The Anchor Bible*) (1964)

TYNDALE: *Tyndale's Old Testament* (1530) (1992 ed. with modern spelling.