

BIBLE TRANSLATORS AS ARBITERS OF AMBIGUITY

PART II

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In Part I of this article we said that any word, or term, or phrase is ambiguous when it may have at least two meanings or referents. We considered four verses from Genesis (18:15, 34:31, 44:22, and 44:17) where the pronouns are ambiguous, not in meaning but in regard to their referents. We showed that translators have dealt with pronominal ambiguity in several different ways; maintaining it, resolving it, avoiding it, or creating new ambiguity of their own. In Part II below we shall examine three exemplars of phrase ambiguity and then offer some conclusions and recommendations for translating biblical verses in which there appears pronominal or phrase ambiguity.

TEXTUAL PHRASE AMBIGUITY

There is phrase ambiguity in narrative and poetic sections of the Tanakh. Because of the conventions of writing standard modern English, there is no way translators can avoid resolving phrase ambiguity when it is present in the Hebrew text. Translators must capitalize some words and use some punctuation marks such as a comma, semicolon, and period in standard English. By doing so they indicate their resolutions, and resolve they must. This "must-resolve" characteristic is a fundamental difference between phrase and pronominal ambiguity.

In phrase ambiguity, three phrases of a verse are involved, with a "floating" middle phrase positioned between the other two. Thus, if the translators associate and connect the floating middle phrase with the first phrase, they obtain one meaning for the verse. If they associate and connect the floating middle phrase with the third phrase, they obtain a different meaning. Consider the narrative of Genesis 34:7, a well-known exemplar of phrase ambiguity, where the sons of Jacob learn that Shechem has raped their sister Dinah.

23. ALTER: *And Jacob's sons had come in from the field when they heard, and the men were pained and they were incensed, for he had done a scurrilous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter such as ought not be done.*

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24. REB: *When they heard the news Jacob's sons came home from the country; they were distressed and very angry, because in lying with Jacob's daughter Shechem had done a disgraceful thing.*

25. NIV: *Now Jacob's sons had come in from the fields as soon as they heard what had happened. They were filled with grief and fury because Shechem had done a disgraceful thing .*

Alter translates the three phrases in the order of the Hebrew text, connects the first phrase (*came in from the field*) with the floating middle phrase (*when they heard*) and leaves the third phrase (*men were pained . . .*) to stand by itself. (Alter also follows the Hebrew text closely by using the pronoun "he," whereas the REB and the NIV substitute "Shechem" for "he.") The REB also connects the Hebrew text's first and second phrases together, but places the second phrase first in the translation, thus putting the phrases in their proper time sequence. Nevertheless, the sequence of events according to Alter and the REB is the same: heard the news (phrase 2); came in from the field (phrase 1); and were pained/distressed (phrase 3). The NIV similarly connects the first and second phrases together but with a stronger emphasis on the time element.

The following translations differ from the above in phrasing.

26. DOUAY: *Behold his sons came from the field: and hearing what had passed, they were exceeding angry, because he had done a foul thing* 27. NRSV: *. . . just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage*

Both the Douay and the NRSV connect the floating middle phrase and the third phrase together. The Douay allows the first phrase to stand alone. The NRSV, however, connects the first phrase with the previous verse (34:6) to create one long combined sequence of events. With these two translations the immediate effect of hearing the news is not to come out of the field but to become angry/indignant. With the Douay and the NRSV, the sequence of events is clear for the reader even though it is different from the Alter, the REB, and the NIV. This second sequence of events is: come out of the field (phrase 1); hear the news (phrase 2); and become angry (phrase 3).

Consider now another translation of V.34:7.

28. BERKELEY: *On hearing of it, Jacob's sons came in from the field, disgusted and angry beyond words, that such a shameful thing*

With this Berkeley translation some phrase ambiguity still exists. It is not clear just what the translators believe is the sequence of events. Did the sons hear, become disgusted, and then come in (that is, phrases 2- 3- 1)? Or, did the sons hear, come in, and then become disgusted (phrases 2-1-3)? If it is the former, then this translation differs from all of the previous ones. In any case and whichever sequence is offered, the translators of Genesis 34:7 make a decision for the reader regarding the phrasing of the verse, and each translation offers the reader a particular view of the event.

Another exemplar of phrase ambiguity appears in II Samuel 1:23, a part of the lament by soon-to-be King David on King Saul and his son Jonathan (who, according to the lament, was David's "brother.") Here, the three phrases in the Hebrew text are: (1) *the loved and the pleasant*, (2) *in their lives*, and (3) *and in their death were not divided*. Some translators, in order to indicate that they view David's lament as poetry, arrange the words in a line-by-line verse form rather than a linear narrative form as in the Hebrew text.

29. KJV: *Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives,
And in their death they were not divided.*

30. TYNDALE: *Saul and Jonathan lovely and pleasant in their lives,
were in their deaths not divided.*

31. NKJV: *Saul and Jonathan were beloved and pleasant in their lives
And in their death they were not parted.*

These three all connect the first and second phrases together, although they differ slightly in words used and in the arrangement of the print type. The KJV and NKJV both set the word "were" in an alternative font to indicate that it is not in the Hebrew text.

The following translations differ in regard to the phrasing as well as in other ways.

32. NRSV: *Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!
In life and death they were not divided.*

33. NEB: *Delightful and dearly loved were Saul and Jonathan;
in life, in death, they were not parted.*

34. McCARTER: *Saul and Jonathan! Beloved and charming!
They were not parted in life,*

and in death they were not separated.

35. GNB: *Saul and Jonathan, so wonderful and dear;
together in life, together in death.*

These four translations all connect the second and third phrases together, allowing the first phrase to stand alone. They, too, use an arrangement of the lines common to poetry. The NRSV and the McCarter use exclamation points to support their phrasing, while the NEB alters the order of the phrases. The GNB translates the third phrase into a positive form, rather than keep the Hebrew text's negative one. Both McCarter and the GNB offer a somewhat free poetic rendering of the second and third phrases. As with the phrase ambiguity in Genesis 34:7, all of the above translations resolve the ambiguity without so indicating.

The final exemplar of phrase ambiguity appears in Ecclesiastes 9:10. The three phrases in the Hebrew text order are: (1) *your hand shall find to do*, (2) *your strength*; and (3) *do*.

36. KJV: *Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.*

37. SCOTT: *Everything your hand finds to do, do with your full strength.*

38. NAB: *Anything you can turn your hand to, do it with what power you have.*

These three translations all connect the second and third phrases together, and they change the Hebrew text's order of these phrases. The following GNB translation compresses the three phrases into only six words.

39. GNB: *Work hard at whatever you do.*

The GNB translation in essence also connects the second and third phrase but creates a new order of the phrases: third phrase; second phrase; and then first phrase.

The JPS translation (the only one of its kind found) connects the first and second phrases together.

40. JPS: *Whatsoever thy hand attaineth to do by thy strength, that do.*

This translation not only resolves the ambiguity differently from all the others, but it also maintains the Hebrew text's order of the phrases. In this rendering a person is commanded to do whatever he can do with his strength.

Note, however, the way that the NJPS translation revises the original JPS.

41. NJPS: *Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might.*

This connects the second and third phrases together, yet maintains the conceptual idea of strength in the first phrase by substituting the word "power" for "find." The result is not only reminiscent of the original JPS translation but also the creation of a modified parallelism between the two English-language segments of the NJPS. It offers a mixed resolution by connecting the substantive element of the middle phrase, strength, with both the first and third phrases.

In summary, each decision about phrasing made by a translator changes the meaning of the verse. In Genesis 34:7 the sequence of the story's events change; in II Samuel 1:23 the relationship of Saul and Jonathan changes; and in Ecclesiastes 9:10 what a person should do changes. In each case, the offered translation makes sense because the floating middle phrase can connect understandably with either the phrase before it or after it. No matter which connection is made, the translator has resolved the ambiguity for the listener and reader, thereby doing the work of interpreting the text for the reader.

SOME CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The task of Bible translation, whether by a single person or a group, is a complex and difficult one because of the nature of the Tanakh and the linguistic and cultural distance between the original authors and the translators. The task is not merely to find the best English word to convey the meaning of a Hebrew word, although that is in itself often quite challenging. Translators also seek to use their words to convey the tone, style, rhythm, and meaning of the Tanakh, at times from a special perspective.¹ Translators must reach both readers and listeners, because sometimes people learn parts of the Bible by hearing them read aloud at religious services or civic events. It may be that in ancient Israel, most people heard rather than read the Tanakh. Even with today's increased literacy rate, however, the percentage of people who read the Tanakh may only be slightly higher than in biblical times.

The task of translators, I believe, should be to convey the words of the Tanakh as accurately as possible, not to recast them or interpret them to serve a particular motive or ideology. Given that the translator's role is to represent rather than interpret, it is nevertheless not possible in translating the Tanakh completely to avoid interpreting it, for a host of reasons that include textual

ambiguity. The task is to maximize representation of the Tanakh and minimize interpretation; to be faithful to the Hebrew text; to be respectful of the reader's desire to have access to the text as it is, not as it might be; and be to skillful in writing a clear, modern, comprehensible English.²

The question, then, is: How can and should translators appropriately cope with pronominal and phrase ambiguity? Once we accept the task of the translator to be the daunting one of maximum representation and minimum recasting, paraphrasing, and interpretation, we need to find devices for translators to use.

The devices suggested below fit both types of ambiguity, but they fit better and more easily with the pronominal type than the phrase type. The devices are not new, just as the recognition of textual ambiguity is not new. Biblical scholars, commentators, and translators have noted for years that ambiguities do exist in the Hebrew text. Sternberg, in dealing with the phrase ambiguity in Genesis 34:7, points out that the ancient rabbis "numbered this among the 'undecidable texts' of the Tanakh" (Bereshit Rabba 80:5).³

The first step is for translators to be sensitive to pronominal and phrase ambiguity in the Hebrew text as well as in their translations. In regard to pronominal ambiguity, the second step, I believe, is to maintain the ambiguity in the translation so as to convey the style and flavor of the Hebrew text. The translator should indicate to the reader that ambiguity exists and what the options for resolution are. This step might necessitate a footnote system or a brief commentary section at the end of each appropriate chapter or book. Such an approach would eliminate the style used in the JPS (Sample 3) and even the KJV (Sample 15) to resolve ambiguity. (See Part I of my paper for all samples cited in this part). With footnotes or commentaries translators could offer what they consider to be the proper resolution. Fox takes this approach in his translation of Genesis 44:22. He maintains the ambiguity by offering "he would die" in his translation at the end of the verse. Then, he states in a footnote: "'He' refers to Yaakov, although the Hebrew is somewhat ambiguous."

Translators ought not to resolve pronominal ambiguity, even if they decide that the ambiguity is unintentional and due to "linguistic and cultural distance" rather than the clear intention of the text's author. (Such resolution is advocated by Margot.⁴ How is it possible to distinguish an intentional from

an unintentional ambiguity? How can a translator know the intention of the biblical author?)

It is only fair and respectful to acknowledge that the resolution of the ambiguity one way or another does affect the meaning of the text and that resolution of ambiguity constitutes interpretation rather than translation. To illustrate how the maintenance of ambiguity whenever possible is the approach most faithful to the Hebrew text, let us consider at some length Genesis 44:22 as a representative of the exemplar verses above. For an appreciation of the pronominal ambiguity included in that verse we need to recall that the verse itself appears within the emotional plea by Judah to Joseph to free Benjamin, who stands accused of stealing Joseph's silver goblet. Judah has approached Joseph (44:15) and begun to employ a number of rhetorical techniques ultimately to convince Joseph to accept Judah as a substitute slave for Benjamin (44:33).⁵ Judah is deferential, polite, and realistic in what he tells Joseph. He seeks sympathetic understanding from Joseph of the unique relationship between Jacob and Benjamin, a special bond between father and son due to the death of the mother, Jacob's favorite wife, and the disappearance of Benjamin's older brother, formerly the father's favorite son. The recognition of this relationship had led to Judah's pledge to his father of responsibility for the "lad," the youngest son (43:8-10).

Judah chooses his words cleverly so as to create sympathy for the "old man" and the "little one," a son of the father's old age (44:20). Judah also wants to create sympathy for himself, because he has taken the little one to Egypt as demanded by Joseph. Judah states that the brothers had told Joseph about the consequences of separating the "old man" and the "lad" (44:22). However, the prior narrative does not in fact say that the brothers told this to Joseph. No matter.

To resolve the ambiguity in 44:22, in order to indicate that either the father will die or that the son will die, is to weaken Judah's plea. To resolve the ambiguity is to tell Joseph what will happen to whom. Resolution at this point is premature, and it would destroy the mounting tension necessary to persuade Joseph to change his mind. Tension is necessary for the creation of sympathy which will reach its climax at the end of Judah's plea in 44:34 when Judah asks his heart-rending rhetorical question concerning Jacob, Benjamin, and himself: *'For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is*

with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!' (NJPS).

Judah succeeds in his emotional appeal. Joseph removes everyone from the room except his brothers, weeps aloud, and reveals himself to his 11 brothers. Judah's techniques have succeeded in helping the brothers pass Joseph's test. The ambiguity in 44:22 is just one of Judah's ploys, and if the translator resolves that ambiguity, he fails to convey to the reader the strong possibility that the ambiguity is a deliberate device of Judah's. Better for Joseph to resolve the ambiguity or at least ponder it as Judah continues his speech. Better for the reader to resolve it or at least ponder it. Given the other techniques employed by Judah, ambiguity here is consistent with the creation of brotherly sympathy. Best for the translator to recognize it and maintain it.

The prudent approach, therefore, is to be skeptical about an apparently easy or common resolution of the ambiguity. Alter takes this position in his translation of Genesis 44:22 (Sample 13). He maintains the ambiguity and then wisely comments on his translation and the ambiguity in a footnote:

The translation reflects the ambiguity of the Hebrew, and one may be skeptical of the often-made claim that the second "he" must refer to Jacob. It seems more likely that this is a studied ambiguity on Judah's part: he leaves it to Joseph to decide whether the old man would die if he were separated from Benjamin, or whether Benjamin could not survive without his father, or whether both dire possibilities might be probable.⁶

In short, it is best to leave it to the readers to resolve instances of pronominal ambiguity. They probably cannot translate the Hebrew text into English, but they may well be able to resolve the ambiguities for themselves. If they cannot resolve the ambiguity satisfactorily, then perhaps they will engage in further study or discussion to aid them. In any case, they will have an experience similar to one provided to Hebrew readers today.

Because phrase ambiguity is different from pronominal ambiguity, the second step for coping with it should be one of two options. The translator can include a resolution in the text and then in a footnote offer alternative resolutions. Or, the translator can devise a system, similar to the one offered below, whereby the maintenance of phrase ambiguity might be possible with

a combination of typographical devices. With either of these options the resolution ultimately rests with the reader, as it should.

Translators, in acknowledging pronominal or phrase ambiguity, can use a combination of devices to alert the reader to the textual difficulty before them. Modern English and typography provide an array of devices that can appear right in the course of the translation, including italics, bold type, all upper-case letters, superscript letters, and various punctuation marks.⁷ All of these are available on personal computers. With a specific and designated combination of such devices and with the purpose explained and illustrated in an introduction, translators can easily acknowledge the presence of ambiguity in the Hebrew text and also offer alternative readings. The King James Version, as shown earlier, already uses an alternative font to indicate a movement away from the Hebrew text.

For example, the pronominal ambiguity in Genesis 18:15 might be translated with use of all upper-case letters and of italics, with options for resolution put in brackets:

And HE [the Lord; Abraham] said, 'Nay, but you did laugh.'

Similarly, the phrase ambiguity in Ecclesiastes 9:10 might be translated as:

Whatsoever your hand finds to do WITH YOUR STRENGTH do it.

This kind of approach is preferable to a resolution by the translator without indication to the readers, and preferable to a mere indication that something has been added to the translation for an unspecified reason. A typographical approach within the text might also preclude the need to complicate a translation by including a commentary in a footnote.

Where this approach is not feasible or desired, footnotes can be used. The NJPS translation already uses raised small, inconspicuous superscript letters to refer readers to a footnote. With devices designed specifically to deal with ambiguity, a translator can easily offer a preferred resolution of a particular instance of phrase ambiguity and in a footnote suggest alternative renderings. This approach might preclude the need to include a full-blown commentary section to accompany the translation.

Finally, a translator can always use a commentary section to explain and interpret to the readers the fine and intricate points of a particular ambiguous passage. By placing the commentary section at the end of a chapter or book of the Tanakh, with referrals indicated in the text, a translator can be faithful

to the Hebrew text without unduly distracting the readers or being disrespectful of them. If desired, the translator and publisher can use a parallel approach, as in the Soncino books of the Tanakh, where a triple parallel system is in effect on each page to present the Hebrew text, the English translation (JPS), and the commentary. Alter and Fox give only the English translation and parallel commentary. Speiser gives a translation divided into short sections, each followed by notes and comments related to that section.

The three approaches suggested above – use of text, footnotes, and commentary -- are all predicated on the concept that translation should seek maximum faithfulness to the Hebrew text. All three are acceptable because resolving or avoiding pronominal and phrase ambiguity in a translation makes interpretive decisions which should be made by the readers. Use of one or more of these approaches is facilitated by modern sophisticated typographical devices and electronic typesetting.

These suggestions, particularly regarding phrase ambiguity, are an extension of the one offered about ambiguity in the Tanakh by translator Eugene Nida. According to Nida:

. . . present-day translators must simply acknowledge that there are different meanings possible by placing in the text those interpretations which seem to agree best with the findings of sound scholarship and providing the reader with the significant alternative renderings.⁸

The effort to cope with pronominal and phrase ambiguity differently from current practice will be worthwhile because translation is significant for most readers of the Tanakh who often use a translation to read and study the Hebrew text. The quality of translation does matter; a given translation will affect our understanding of the Tanakh.

NOTES

1. For an elaboration on this point see Robert Alter's introduction to his translation of Genesis in "To the Reader," *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996) pp. ix-xxxix. For corroboration and additional points see the introductions by Everett Fox and E.A. Speiser to their translations of Genesis.

2. Alter, *Ibid.*

3. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985) p.451-452.
4. Jean-Claude Margot, "Should Translation of the Bible Be Ambiguous?" *The Bible Translator*, Vol.32, No.4 (Oct. 1981) p.413.
5. For more on persuasive rhetorical devices see Ronald T. Hyman, "Power of Persuasion: Judah, Abigail, and Husai," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol.23, No.1 (January-March 1995) pp.9-16.
6. Alter, p. 264.
7. Note that the counterparts of the many typographical devices available in English do not appear in the original Hebrew scrolls and are absent also from printed editions of the Tanakh in Hebrew, except for the numbering of the verses and the use of a two-diamond colon to indicate the end of each verse).
8. Eugene A. Nida, "New Meanings for Old," *Good News for Everyone* (Waco,Texas: Word Book, 1977) p. 62. (This book chapter was published in edited form in *The Bible Translator*, Vol.31, No. 2, April 1980, pp.224-228.)

FULL NAMES AND DATES OF TRANSLATIONS CITED

ALTER: Robert Alter, *Genesis* (1996)

BERKELEY: *New Berkeley Version*, rev. ed. (1959)

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

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

JPS: Jewish Publication Society (1917)

KJV: King James Version (1611)

McCARTER: P.K. McCarter, *II Samuel* (*The Anchor Bible*) (1984)

NAB: *New American Bible* (1986)

NEB: *New English Bible* (1970)

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

NJPS: New Jewish Publication Society *Genesis* (1962)

NKJV: *New King James Version* (1989)

NRSV: *New Revised Standard Version* (1989)

REB: Revised English Bible (1989).

SCOTT: R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (*The Anchor Bible*) (1965)

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