

Five, not Two, Basic Translation Theories

Dr. Bill Mounce

INTRODUCTION

It is normal to divide translations into two groups, “formal equivalent” and “functional equivalent” (or dynamic). Related terms are “natural language,” “literal,” “word of word,” “thought for thought,” and “paraphrase.”

In a formal equivalent translation, the translation adheres as closely as possible to the grammatical structures of the original language, altering the translation only when necessary to convey meaning. They try to use the same English word for the same Greek word where possible (“concordance”).

In a functional equivalent translation, the intent is to discover the original meaning—the “authorial intent”— and then convey the same meaning in the target language; it does not feel the need to use the same grammatical structures (e.g., Greek participle for English participle).

I have come to see that this two-fold division is not accurate.; there are at least five categories of translation theory, and compressing all translations into one of two categories blurs important distinctions.

In addition, translations do not fit neatly into a single category; the same translation can be formal in one verse and functional in the next. Also, translations should not be graphed as separate points along a line as if there is no overlap; the ESV and NIV (for example) should be seen as overlapping circles with more in common than they are different.

Nevertheless, let’s look at these five categories.

1. LITERAL

Although I dislike the term “literal,” I will use it here to make a point. If someone wants a “literal” translation, there is only one example of a truly “literal translation”: the interlinear. But even interlinears are not “literal” in the sense that mostly people use the word (as I have argued in my other paper).

An interlinear will list the Greek words in Greek word order, and under each Greek word will appear a basic gloss for its meaning. Here is Romans 3:22.

δικαιοσύνη	δὲ	θεοῦ	διὰ	πίστεως	Ἰησοῦ	Χριστοῦ
righteousness	but	of God	through	faith	of Jesus	of Christ

εἰς	πάντας	τοὺς	πιστεύοντας.	οὐ	γάρ	ἐστὶν	διαστολή,
into	all	the	believing	not	for	it is	distinction

Is it understandable? Barely. Is it translation? No. As much as I would like the word “literal” to go away, I doubt it will. Will people start to use the word accurately? I hope so. But please, do not believe the marketing hype: there is no such thing as a “literal” translation. The very idea is linguistic nonsense.

2. FORMAL EQUIVALENCE

Formal equivalent translations try to reflect the formal structures of the original text, making the translation “transparent” to the original. This means translating indicative verbs as indicative, participles as participles, and trying to use the same English word for the same Greek word if possible. When it makes no sense to translate word-for-word, the translators ask what the verse means, and then how they can convey the same meaning while adhering as closely as possible to the formal Greek structures. The ESV, NASB, and KJV¹ fall into this camp.

¹ An argument can be made for the KJV being in the next category, the functional equivalent. While it definitely prefers to go word-for-word, at times it becomes quite dynamic. Paul asks, “Shall we continue

However, if a formal equivalent translation abandons form and translates meaning when going word-for-word is nonsensical, is this not, in and of itself, a refutation of its basic principle? What matters is *meaning*, not *form*. If the *meaning* of the sentence is the ultimate criterion, then meaning should always be the ultimate goal of translation and not the *form* in which it is communicated.

By staying as close as possible to the Hebrew and Greek words, formal equivalent translations honor the dividing line between translation and commentary. This is commendable; while all translations are interpretive, formal equivalent translations are less so, and so there is less possibility of the reader being confused as to what the text *says* as opposed to what the translators think the passage *means*. The downside is that to the uninitiated, formal equivalent translations can give the impression of not being interpretive at all. No Bible translator would make this claim, but Bible marketers are a different lot.

Formal equivalent translation also tend to favor ambiguity, which can be helpful for the advanced student. Does “love of Christ” mean “Christ’s love for me” (subjective genitive) or “my love for Christ” (objective genitive)? But at the same time, a formal equivalent translation cannot claim to be accurate; ambiguity and accuracy are not overlapping goals since accuracy is a function of meaning, not form. The ESV’s and CSB’s interpretation of 2 Cor 5:14 is ambiguous and not clear. The NIV’s and NLT’s translation as “Christ’s love” is both interpretive, unambiguous, and accurate.

For pastors who preach exegetically, formal equivalency can be a real plus because there is less need to correct the translation. I will never forget the time when I corrected the NIV in three consecutive sermons. Kathy came to me, clutching her NIV with tears

in sin, that grace may abound?” and then responds, “God forbid.” The word “God” and the word “forbid” do not occur in the Greek, but it is an excellent dynamic translation of the meaning of the phrase, *mē genoito*. Or the famous Psalm 23:4 — “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” The Hebrew word behind “shadow of death” is “darkness,” but the KJV dynamically interprets “darkness” to mean “death.”

in her eyes and asking, "Does this mean I can't trust my Bible?" I never corrected a translation again from the pulpit, and it is why I vote for footnotes showing alternate interpretations as frequently as possible. (Maybe I should have been on the NET translation team.) But the downside for the pastor is that these translations often need a pastor to explain their wooden and unnatural and ambiguous English.

For first year Greek students, formal equivalent translations provide a useful crutch in parsing and sentence structure. However, they become a detriment to advanced students who will find greater benefit from functional equivalent versions, since they are actually making exegetical decisions rather than leaving the text awkward and obscure. Besides, who wants to spend their life walking with crutches, or needing a software program to mouse over for parsings?²

It may give some people comfort to think that their translation reflects the underlying Greek and Hebrew structures, but if they don't know Greek and Hebrew then they can't know when the translations in fact do reflect that structure. In every single verse, there are differences between the Greek and the English. But I have to ask, why is this important? If someone knows Hebrew and Greek well enough to benefit from seeing its structure reflected in English, then they should read Hebrew and Greek. If someone doesn't know enough to read Hebrew and Greek, what legitimate reason can there be for favoring an awkward, wooden translation that gives the illusion that they do know the languages? The only answer is pride, but that sounds unkind so I would never say it.

An attempt to provide concordance to the English reader is also commendable, but at the same time it can be tricky. One of the most difficult passages to translate is 1

² Sometimes I wonder if people forget that we are not ultimately talking about translation in general but about the translation of God's holy Word. Sometimes I wonder if people are more committed to a translation theory than they are to actually conveying the salvific message that in Christ the world is being reconciled to God. Sometimes I wonder if people immersed in this debate would rather argue for their theory than to present the gospel message in a way that their neighbor can understand.

Timothy 2:1–7 because we no longer have the word to translate ἄνθρωπος, which Paul is using to tie the passage together.³ Paul’s basic argument is that the Ephesians should pray for all “men,” because God wishes all “men” to be saved, and there is only one mediator between God and “men,” the “man” Christ Jesus. Only the NASB keeps the concordance, but thereby suggests to many modern readers that the Ephesians should pray for all males. Even the ESV, which has a strong commitment to concordance, translates πάντων ἀνθρώπων as “all people” in v 2, with a footnote on verse 5. God wants all people to be saved, and the point is not that Christ Jesus is a male but that he is part of humanity.

Another issue with concordance is that it can place too much weight on one gloss of a word and can thereby mislead. The NASB translates πόλις every time as “city.” This is helpful for the informed English reader watching for concordance, but the “city” of Nazareth was no more than a wide spot in the road inhabited by 600 people and hence the practice also misinforms.⁴ Teachers know that σάρξ occurs 147 times in the Greek Testament and is translated 24 different ways in the ESV (excluding plurals). λόγος occurs 334 times and is translated 36 different ways by the NASB. Concordance may be an ideal for which to strive, but it is frequently impossible to achieve.

Some claim that formal equivalent translations have a higher view of inspiration, recognizing each word as a word from God and hence worthy of translation. When modern translators do not know for sure what a word or phrase means, I agree that there is value in simply translating the words and leaving interpretation up to the reader. We do not know what “Selah” means in the Psalms, but most translations still include it and someday I would like to see “Selah” back in the NIV. However, this insistence that formal equivalent translations have a higher view of inspiration shows a defective view of language and how it conveys meaning. Meaning can be conveyed by a

³ See discussion of gender language below.

⁴ The ESV translates πόλις 121 times as city/cities and 40 times as town(s). “Neapolis” occurs twice.

single word, but usually it is conveyed by a group of words. Verbal plenary inspiration means that the meaning conveyed by the words is from God; however, if inspiration applies to the words themselves, then none of us would or should be reading English Bibles since those inspired words are in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and none of our translations should bear the word “Holy” on the cover.

I have been deeply involved in a formal equivalent translation (ESV) and a functional equivalent translation (NIV). Even though there are differences between committee members, and between translation committees, I have seen absolutely no difference in $\alpha\psi$ my colleagues’ commitment to Scripture as God’s inspired word.

3. FUNCTIONAL (OR DYNAMIC) EQUIVALENCE

Functional (for dynamic) translations argue that the purpose of translation is to convey the meaning of the original text into the target language. It may mean that a participle is translated as an indicative verb, or that a few Greek words are passed over (such as conjunctions) or translated as punctuation marks in order to produce proper English meaning and style. This introduces an additional amount of interpretation, which can be problematic. It also produces a more understandable translation, which is the purpose of translation. However, these versions can still be somewhat idiomatic, not speaking totally natural English but adhering somewhat to the underlying Greek and Hebrew structures. The NIV and CSB⁵ fit into this camp,⁶ and it is important to distinguish these translations from natural language translations such as the NLT.

Many who adhere to the functional view of translation see little meaning in the grammatical structures of the original text. I take issue with this, especially in reference to dependent and independent constructions. Not always, but certainly many times, the flow of the author’s thought is most clearly seen in the main sentence, and the

⁵ The CSB uses their own terminology of “optimal equivalence.”

⁶ Also the CEB, NET, REB, NAB. Some people call this a “mediating” category of translation.

dependent constructions are secondary, modifying thoughts. The best example is the Great Commission. Despite the many sermons you and I have heard from missionaries, the Great Commission is not, “Go!” There actually is only one imperative: “Make disciples of all nations.” In order to do this, Jesus supplies three modifying thoughts (dependent participial phrases) to tell us that this involves “going” (necessary to reach all people groups), baptizing (i.e., evangelism), and “teaching” (i.e., discipleship). Some meaning is being conveyed by structure, and that is significant.

I recently read Luther’s Open Letter on Translation (1530). The plural “we” refers to the Collegium Biblicum, established as the first translation committee for the Luther Bible.

I have always tried to translate in a pure and clear German. It has often happened that for three or four weeks we have searched and inquired about a single word, and sometimes we have not found it even then... We do not have to ask the literal Latin how we are to speak German, as these donkeys [the papists] do. Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, by the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.

While I would not term scholars following a different translation philosophy as “donkeys,” I find myself agreeing with Luther. We are writing English, not Greek.

Functional translations create readable translations that do not require a pastor or professor to explain (except in some circumstances). As we celebrate the 500th year of the Reformation with its emphasis on *sola scriptura*, we can be thankful for translations that fit in this category. The downside is that at times they have to become more interpretive to communicate more clearly, and this limitation is generally acknowledged.

STYLE: SEQUENCE AND SERIES

It is interesting to ask if the writing style is part of the meaning of a passage? I think so, at least to some degree, and your answer to this question Will affect your view of translation theory. The Bible has a wide variety of writing styles throughout the different books. Some are erudite, such as Isaiah and Hebrews, and others are basic, what we might expect from a second language writer like Mark. We have different genres; poetry should not read like prose, but Greek poetry should not necessarily read like English poetry since they are so different. To illustrate the challenges of style, let me talk about two items, sequence and series.

A common Greek construction is to have an aorist adverbial participle followed by an indicative verb. This is one way in which the Greeks indicate sequence. The first-year Greek student, in order to show that they understand it is an aorist, would most likely have to distinguish the participle from the indicative as well as include “after” to show that it is adverbial. Matthew 2:3 would read, “King Herod, *after hearing*, was troubled.” This translation distinguishes the two verbal forms but at the expense of English style.

In English, we handle sequence differently. If we hear A, and B, and C, we tend to hear them in sequence. A happened, then B, then C. Greek doesn’t, so it needs an indicator that one action happened first and then the second. This is a common function of the aorist participle with an indicative verb. So how do we translate Matthew 2:3 with proper English style? We say, “King Herod heard and was troubled.” We turn the participle (“hearing”) into an indicative (“heard”) because that is what English style requires to indicate sequence. Using a past-tense participle (“after hearing”) in this context is poor English style, and the sequencing of the two indicative verbs conveys the same meaning to the English reader.

Another example of difference in style is how Greek and English handle a series of items. Greek tends to use conjunctions more than we do, so it says A and B and C and D. This is poor English style; we say A, B, C, and D. The first may reflect Greek

structure but is poor English. The latter reflects how we speak and write but it omits translating a few conjunctions, or it can be argued that the conjunctions are translated by the commas.

This illustrates why it is impossible to translate in a way that is faithful to Greek and at the same time remain sufficiently flexible so as to retain accurate and acceptable English style. You can't have it both ways (unless you like biblish), and each translation must choose one course or another.

4. NATURAL LANGUAGE

"Natural language" theory is technically an extension of functional equivalence, but it sees no value in any of the formal structures and tries to repeat the same message in the full idiom of the target language. Perhaps this is where the common phrase "thought for thought" belongs. Eugene Nida says that the purpose of a translation is to transport "the message of the original text ... into the receptor language [such] that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors."⁷ The best example of a natural language translation is the NLT.⁸ There is much I enjoy in the NLT. I often read it to see what a highly qualified group of scholars believes the biblical text means, and it rarely disappoints.

However, there is a significant difference between natural language and functional equivalent translations. Not only do the natural language translations reveal none of the underlying Greek structure, but they will often introduce ideas simply not included in the Greek in order to achieve natural English style and readability. As a result, readers don't know if they are reading the Bible or the translators' insertions. This is the basic

⁷ Nida, Eugene A., and Charles R. Taber. (1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation, With Special Reference to Bible Translating*, p. 202. Leiden: Brill.

⁸ Also the NCV, GW, GNT, CEV, JB, NJB. I am using terms a little differently here from how other people use them. Mark Strauss, for example, equates "functional" and "natural," and what I call "functional" he calls "mediating."

reason why I separate functional equivalent translations like the NIV and CSB, which are quite restrained in what they add, and natural language translations like the NLT, which are comfortable adding a significant amount of extra information.

Often, this additional information is necessary, and you will see inserted words in functional and even formal equivalent translations.

- The NASB likes inceptive imperfects and will add “begin to” into the text. It will generally italicize added words in this and other situations.
- Greek often omits the direct object of the verb, or uses a pronoun where English needs the antecedent.
- Greek likes long sentences. When they are shortened for English style, the subject from the first part of the Greek sentence often needs to be repeated with the second English sentence.

These are all acceptable translation practices.

However, Luke tells us that the sailors lowered the sea anchor because they feared they would run aground on “the Syrtis” (Acts 27:17). The NLT continues, “They were afraid of being driven across to the sandbars of Syrtis off the African coast.” Assuming the Greek readers would understand “the Syrtis” as “the sandbars off the African coast,” the NLT does achieve its goal of conveying the full meaning of the original, but to my mind this goes beyond the role of a translation. Certainly not all ancient people knew there was a sandbar in that area, and Luke did not feel it was important to add this fact, assuming “run aground” was sufficient to convey the meaning. I do not think this is acceptable translation practice. Commentary? Yes. Bible translation? No.

Some functional equivalent translations will also do this from time to time. The ESV of Acts 28:11 reads, “After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.” The CSB capitalizes “Twin Gods” and footnotes their identity. The NIV, however, reads, “it was an

Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux.” I am uncomfortable with this addition.

I have one other objection with natural language translations. If I read a modern translation of Caesar’s Gallic Wars, and it reads so naturally that I could not tell it was speaking of a person who lived two millennia ago in a different culture, I would naturally be suspicious of the translation. There is something significant about entering into the historical context in order to understand what was written. After all, Christianity is rooted in history. Unlike most other religions, if these things did not happen—the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus—then we believe in vain. They did happen, but they happened in a different time in a different culture and are told to us in a different language. I believe it is helpful to feel the cultural differences.⁹

Related to this is the tendency in natural language translations to “flatten out” the writer’s style. Mark and Luke sound alike. Poetry is explained to the point that it often sounds like prose. The distinctive elements of an ancient work should be maintained if at all possible.

5. PARAPHRASE

Finally, I need to mention the term “paraphrase.” It is sometimes used, erroneously so, in discussions of translations that change or distort the historical meaning of the text. As is the case with the term “literal,” we need to use words that actually mean what we say they mean. Linguists use “paraphrase” for a rewording for the purpose of simplification *in the same language*, not in a different language. So the Living Bible is a true paraphrase

⁹ All translations have to deal with the related issue of weights and measures, and do they use the American or the metric system? Was the wicked servant forgiven his debt of a μυρίων ταλάντων (Matt 18:24), was it a myriad of talents, “ten thousand talents” (NASB, with the footnote, “A talent was worth more than fifteen years’ wages of a laborer”), or “ten thousand bags of gold” (NIV, with the footnote, “Greek ten thousand talents; a talent was worth about 20 years of a day laborer’s wages”). The Greek lexicon *BDAG* defines μυρία as “ten thousand,” but continues by saying “in our lit. used hyperbolically, as in Engl. informal usage ‘zillion’, of an extremely large or incalculable number.” Such are the challenges of replicating the original context while remaining understandable.

since it is a simplification of the (English) ASV, but viewing a translation from the Hebrew and Greek as a paraphrase is an incorrect use of the term.

Some people will use the phrase “thought-for-thought” to describe a paraphrase. The problem is that all translations are, to some degree, thought for thought. Consider the simple and common expression τοῦ θεοῦ, an article and a noun both in the genitive, generally translated as a prepositional phrase, “of God.” But a closer look shows that even this is very much thought-for-thought.

- “of God” omits the article τοῦ
- “of God” capitalizes “God”
- a genitive construction (which we do not have in English) is replaced with a prepositional phrase

Or consider another common construction of article + noun + article + prepositional phrase. ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφῆτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν in Matthew 5:12 is generally translated “They persecuted the prophets who were before you.” But notice again what happens

- The second article (τοὺς) is not translated because it is a grammatical marker, showing that the next phrase is in an attributive relationship to the preceding noun.
- The prepositional phrase πρὸ ὑμῶν is translated as a relative clause, “who were before you.”

Idioms obviously are translated thought for thought, unless you want to say that Mary “conceived in the womb” (συλλήμνη ἐν γαστρὶ). Where else would she conceive?

Mark Strauss suggests using “contemporary relevance versions” or “transculturations” for this category of translations since these versions alter the cultural perspective of the text in order to connect to the modern reader, but the tongue twisting necessary to say the words suggests they will not be adopted by the church. However, I do not believe these should be called “Bibles” because at any point it is hard to tell what is the Bible and what is the author’s attempt to make the message of the

Bible relevant to his (or her) own culture. In this category are J.B. Phillip's wonderful *The New Testament in Modern English* (my mom became a Christian reading this book), Eugene Petersen's *The Message*, and Kenneth Taylor's original *Living Bible*.

These publications sacrifice historical precision for contemporary relevance. So Peterson will say that the Pharisees are "manicured grave plots" instead of "white-washed tombs" (Matthew 23:27). The Pharisees live lives as "perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next," instead of saying the Pharisees make "their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long" (Matthew 23:5, NIV). Peterson is making the text relevant for the twenty-first century at the expense of historical accuracy.

CONCLUSION

There are five clearly defined schools of translation, and all but the interlinear are committed, in varying degrees, to convey meaning and not just the words. We should not be simplistic at categorizing a translation as if it always follows just one translation philosophy, and I hope that people will learn there is a significant amount of overlap between translations. After all, if each were totally different, then they can't all be trustworthy, and the church will be forced back into the dark ages where only the elite were able to understand.