The Myth of Literal Translation

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INTRODUCTION

Words mean something, and we should use words in accordance with what they actually mean. I am proposing that we stop using the word "literal' in all discussion of translation, because the word "literal" does not "literally" mean what we say it means, and as a result people are confused as to what a "literal translation" is, and more importantly what it means to have an "accurate" translation.

Our decision here impacts the church. People will say they want a "literal" Bible, by which they generally mean word-for-word. So by their very definition of the term "literal," the conclusion of the debate on biblical translation is assumed. The problem is that this simply is not what the word "literal" means, and I would propose that accuracy is not an inherent property of word-for-word translations.

This fallacy has been encouraged by Bible publishers who talk about a "literal Bible," and by footnotes that say "Literally." For example, the father greets his prodigal son by "embracing" him (Luke 15:20), and the NASB footnote reads, "Lit *fell on his neck*." We all know that translating ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ as "fell on his neck" is linguistic nonsense, so how can it be called "literal" or seen as "accurate"? Did the father attack the son? Did he strangle him? Did the father trip and fall, and the son's neck caught him? How can "fell on his neck" be "literal"? Word for word, yes. Accurate, no.

DEFINITION OF "LITERAL"

The fact of the matter is that every English dictionary defines the word "literal" primarily as meaning "without embellishment." In other words, the basic meaning of the word "literal" has to do with *meaning*, not *form*. It denotes the actual, factual *meaning* of something, "free from exaggeration or embellishment" (*Merriam-Webster*). It does not have to do with *form*, such as translating a Greek participle "literally" as an English participle.

The Oxford English Dictionary, which I am told by my British friends is the only dictionary that matters, gives these basic categories of meaning (omitting the obsolete or rare categories):

I. "Of or relating to a letter or letters," e.g., distinguishing between oral and written communication. Most of these entries in this category are marked as rare or obsolete.

II. "Free from metaphor, allegory, etc."

> "5.a. orig. *Theol.* Originally in the context of a traditional distinction between the literal sense and various spiritual *senses* of a sacred text: designating or relating to the sense *intended by the author* of a text, normally discovered by taking the words in their natural or customary *meaning*, in the *context* of the text as a whole, without regard to an ulterior spiritual or symbolic *meaning*" (emphasis added).

Notice the emphasis on meaning, not form. "Literal sense" vs. "spiritual sense." "Customary meaning." Understanding a word "in the context of the text as a whole." Opposed to a "symbolic meaning." Nowhere in this definition do you find anything akin to form, to thinking that a literal translation would translate indicative verbs as indicative, or participles as dependent constructions. "Literal" has to do with meaning, not form.

OED continues,

> "5.c. Of, relating to, or designating the primary, original, or etymological
> *sense* of a word, or the exact *sense* expressed by the actual wording of a
> phrase or passage, as distinguished from any extended *sense*, metaphorical
> *meaning*, or *underlying significance*" (emphasis added).
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> "6.a. That is (the thing specified) in a real or actual sense, without
> metaphor, exaggeration, or distortion."

Other English dictionaries such as *Merriam-Webster*,[1] the *Random House Unabridged
Dictionary*,[2] and The *American Heritage Dictionary*[3] agree.[4]

If Jack asked Jill what Eddie literally said, he is asking Jill to repeat Eddie's actual
words. Jack is asking for direct speech, not indirect speech. Jack does not want Jill to
embellish what Eddie said. Hence, a "literal" translation is one that primarily is faithful
to the *meaning* of the original author.

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1 (1) 1a: according with the letter of the scriptures adheres to a literal reading of the passage. 1b: adhering
to fact or to the ordinary construction or primary meaning of a term or expression: "actual" — liberty in
the *literal* sense is impossible —B. N. Cardozo. 1c: free from exaggeration or embellishment — the *literal*
truth. 1d: characterized by a concern mainly with facts — a very *literal* man. (2) of, relating to, or
expressed in letters — The distress signal SOS has no *literal* meaning. (3) reproduced word-for-word:
"exact, verbatim" — a *literal* translation

[2] (1) in accordance with, involving, or being the primary or strict meaning of the word or words; not
figurative or metaphorical: "the literal meaning of a word." (2) following the words of the original very
closely and exactly: "a literal translation of Goethe." (3) true to fact; not exaggerated; actual or factual: "a
literal description of conditions." (4) being actually such, without exaggeration or inaccuracy: "the literal
extermination of a city. (5) (of persons) tending to construe words in the strict sense or in an
unimaginative way; matter-of-fact; prosaic. (6) of or relating to the letters of the alphabet. (7) of the nature
of letters.

[3] (1) Conforming or limited to the simplest, nonfigurative, or most obvious meaning of a word or words.
(2) word-for-word; verbatim: *a literal translation*. (3) Avoiding exaggeration, metaphor, or embellishment;
factual; prosaic. (4) Consisting of, using, or expressed by letters.

[4] The *Collins English Dictionary* has as it's primary meaning, "The literal sense of a word or phrase is its
most basic sense." The *Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English* has, "taking words in their usual or
most basic sense without metaphor or allegory."

"WORD-FOR-WORD"

To be sure, there is a secondary definition that could support the use of "literal" when it comes to translation theory. OED has its definition 7a (out of 7), "Of a translation, version, or transcript: representing the very words of the original: "verbally exact." The *American Heritage Dictionary* has as its second definition, "word-for-word; verbatim," and gives the illustration, "a literal translation."

First of all, notice that these are not the primary meaning of "literal." *Merriam-Webster* lists this usage as #3, *Random House* as #2. Should we focus our attention on a secondary or tertiary meaning of a word when doing so has produced so much confusion?

Secondly, notice that the word "literal" has a surprisingly wide range of meaning. One dictionary lists the following as examples of the word's use. "The 300,000 Unionists … will be *literally* thrown to the wolves." Of course, the speaker "literally" does not expect the Unionists to be torn apart by animals. Another dictionary speaks of "fifteen years of *literal* hell," but that does not mean "hell," "Hades,"—at least, not "literally." And in the case of this secondary usage of the word, its meaning is the exact opposite of its primary meaning. The primary meaning of "literal' is "the same *meaning*," and this usage seems to be "the same *form*."

Thirdly, I question whether any translation actually qualifies as a "literal" translation according to this secondary meaning, even an interlinear. Take something as simple as τοῦ θεοῦ. What is its literal translation? "Of God?" First of all, we do not have a genitive case in English, and so we must turn a foreign grammatical construction into a prepositional phrase, "of God." Secondly, no translation would write "the God" but simply "God" since we know the article is functioning in Greek as part of a proper name, which we don't do in English. And then of course we have to capitalize (or not capitalize, "God." So how is it "literal" to translate τοῦ θεοῦ as "of God"? Would it be "literal" to translate ὁ Πέτρος as "the peter?"

Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus "upholds all things by the word of his power." This is basically word-for-word what the Greek says (φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ). The problem, of course, is that the translation doesn't mean anything. I could understand "the power of his word," but not the reverse. δυνάμεως is clearly an Hebraic genitive and hence the NLT translates, "he sustains everything by the *mighty power* of his command." A "literal" translation would produce a meaningless phrase if all it did was translate words.

But let me push on this a little. A better word-for-word "translation" of Hebrews 1:3 is, "upholding and the all things by the word of power his." But still, even in this nonsensical "translation," I had to interpret the adjectival phrase τὰ πάντα ("the all") as a substantival construction ("all things"). I had to change a dative phrase (τῷ ῥήματι) into a prepositional phrase ("by the word"). I also changed a genitive phrase (τῆς δυνάμεως) into a prepositional phrase ("of power"), and the genitive pronoun αὐτοῦ into a possessive pronoun and change the word order.

The second article preceding the adjective in the second attributive position would never be translated "the," not by the most rigid of the formal equivalent translations. Does anyone think that "τοὺς προφήτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν" (Matt 5:12) should be "literally" translated as, "the prophets the before you"? No, everyone dynamically translates the prepositional phrase as a relative clause, including the NASB, ESV, and CSB. "The prophets who were before you."

Personal possessives normally follow the word they modify, so we read τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς αὐτοῦ (Matt 1:2). But no one translates "the brother of him," so how can translating "his brother," including dropping of the article τούς, be termed "literal"? Then add to this the fact that ἀδελφός often includes both men and women; translating either "brother" or "brother and sister" both involve interpretation, the very thing a formal equivalent translation tries not to do. I will never forget the time in translation committee where one of my colleagues was making a passionate point and concluded

by saying, "And the Greek says, 'brother.'" My response was almost word-for-word the same, "literally," but I concluded, "And the Greek says, 'ἀδελφός.'" I still loss the vote.

If we were to follow this secondary definition of "literal," then none of us would read Bibles; instead, we would be reading interlinears. We would turn to John 3:16 and read, "in this way for he loved the God the world so that the son the only he gave in order that each the believing into him not he perish but he has life eternal (οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ᾽ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον)." These are the English words that "literally" represent the Greek words. But no one thinks this is translation, so why would someone ask for a "literal" translation of the Bible? Any publisher that advertises their Bible is a "literal" translation should only be selling interlinears.

My point is simply this. We miscommunicate when we claim a literal translation goes word-for-word when in fact there is not a single verse in the Bible where they actually do.

This illustration also betrays the argument that we should read word-for-word translations because they reflect Greek structure. But considering how often all word-for-word translations diverge from the actual Greek, how can someone who doesn't know Greek know when the translation is in fact going word-for-word, and when it is being interpretive. If a translation claims to be "literal" and yet diverges from the Greek in every verse, is that not deceptive marketing? Formal equivalent translations like the ESV and NASB certainly have their place, especially when students learning Greek need a crutch. But outside of the classroom, the claim that they supposedly follow Greek structure is at best misleading, and at worse deceptive, when it comes to people who don't know Greek. Besides, if you know Greek well enough to gain insight from the Greek structure (which is well past the ability of most first year Greek students), then why not read Greek? It is one thing to use a crutch when you first come out of foot surgery, but who wants to walk with a crutch the rest of their life?

DO WORDS HAVE A LITERAL MEANING?

But let's look at the words themselves. My friend Mark Strauss, also on the CBT, makes the point that even a word does not have a "literal" meaning but rather what we call a "semantic range." I like to refer to words as having a bundle of sticks, with each stick representing a different (but perhaps related) meaning (but perhaps not related). Certainly, one of the sticks may be larger than the rest, representing the core idea of the word or what we teach in first-year Greek as the "gloss," but it is only one among many. So if you were producing a "literal" Bible, how would you find the "literal" meaning of a word? A first-year gloss perhaps, but not the meaning of the word, and who wants to read a Bible written for first year Greek students, except perhaps first year greek students.

Mark uses the example of the word "key." What does "key" "literally" mean? The answer is that it has no "literal" meaning. It has no core meaning. There is no big stick in its bundle. "Did you lose your key?" "What is the key to the puzzle?" "What is the key point?" "What key is that song in?" "Press the A key." "He shoots best from the key." "I first ate key lime pie in Key West in the Florida Keys."

So what is the "literal" meaning of σάρξ? The NIV (1984) was been heavily criticized for translating σάρξ as context requires, but even the ESV uses 24 different English words to translate the one Greek word. σάρξ has no "literal" meaning. Its main non-figurative use may be "flesh"; in fact, the biggest stick in its bundle may be "flesh." But why would we think that "flesh" is its literal meaning, or even its original meaning?[5]

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[5] My linguistics professor in seminary used to complain that dictionaries make the tacit assumption that the core (or at least the original) meaning of a word is its concrete meaning, and only over time has it developed figurative meanings. Why? Professor LaSor would often talk about the modern misunderstandings of ancient languages, saying that the "cave man" never said "Ugh." Every ancient language we have found is extremely complex, one of the most complex being that of the aborigine people of Australia. It is only over time that languages simplify. To this point, consider the fact that one of God's greatest creative acts in all reality—only after the miracles of creation *ex nihilo* and the Incarnation and resurrection of Jesus—was Babel. In one night, God created all the languages of the earth in all their complexities and intricacies. (There is no other way to account for human languages, and this

MEANING IS CONVEYED PRIMARILY BY PHRASES, NOT BY INDIVIDUAL WORDS

Languages say the same thing, but in different ways. The goal of translation is to accurately convey the meaning of the original text into the receptor language. All would agree so far.

But what does "accurate" mean? How do you express meaning? How do you translate meaning accurately? In the past, I sided with the argument that "accurate" meant as word-for-word as possible and leave interpretation up to the English reader. However, we rarely convey meaning with only one word. Meaning is usually conveyed through a group of words, bound together by grammar, understood within a specific context. I like to say that "language is the stringing together of one ambiguity after another," and therefore meaning requires a context larger than an individual word. Accuracy has to do with meaning, not with form.

When I was learning German, I went to the Goethe Institute in Schwäbisch Hall, Germany. There is nothing like learning a language in an immersive experience. Some of my friends knew a lot more German than I did, but they were good at forcing me to speak in German rather than rescue me with English. One day it was cold outside, so I thought I would say that I was cold. "I" is "Ich." "Am" is "bin." "Cold" is "kalt." So I proudly announced, "Ich bin kalt." If you know German, you can imagine what happened. My friends hit the ground, rolling and laughing hysterically.

I reviewed my words. Yes, "Ich bin kalt" are the right words. I had conveyed meaning accurately I thought; my friends' laughter disagreed. When they managed to regain their composure, they told me that if I wanted to say I was cold, I should have

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is, I believe, one of the strongest arguments for the existence of God.) Part of this creative act was to endow words with a range of meaning from the beginning of the language.

This is why it is impossible to bring all the nuances of the Greek and Hebrew into English. Words are much too rich in meaning to be encapsulated into a single gloss. The more functional the translation, the easier it is to bring more of the meaning over. What is easier to understand? Jesus is our *hilasmos*, our "propitiation" (NASB), "expiation" (RSV), or our "atoning sacrifice" (NIV), the"sacrifice that atones for our sins" (NLT; 1 John 2:2). For a formal equivalent translation especially, nuances will by necessity be lost.

said, "To me it is cold." "Mir ist kalt." I asked what I had "said," and they replied that I said I was sexually frigid. Later that spring, I still had not learned my lesson and announced, "Ich bin warm" (instead of "mir ist heiß" or "es ist heiß"). I will let you figure out what "Ich bin warm" means.

I have been reminded as of late what my German friends taught me, that we communicate in groups of words, bound together by grammar, and understood within a specific context. It is naive to think that a word-for-word substitution from one language to another is inherently more accurate. If you disagree, I suggest you do not travel to Germany in the late fall.

METAPHORS

You can expand this argument concerning the word 'literal' by looking at metaphors. What is the literal meaning of a metaphor? No one argues that every metaphor should be translated word-for-word because that would generally be meaningless. But that is the point. What is the primary criteria that controls our translation? Is it attention to form, or meaning, that creates an accurate translation? The fact that metaphors almost always need to be interpreted shows that meaning is primary to form.

I would guess that most translations will keep a metaphor as a metaphor if it makes sense in the target language. Paul says, "So I say, *walk* by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal 5:16, NIV). I would also guess most translations will use a comparable metaphor in the target language if one exists. I was speaking in China a few years back and used the phrase "straddle the fence." As soon as I said it, I realized that I hadn't seen any fences, and I asked the translator what she said. She laughed and repeated, "a foot in two boat."[6] But if the metaphor cannot cross over to the target

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[6] Chinese doesn't have plural forms except for a few personal pronouns. They let a word like "two" make the point that there was more than one boat.

language, going word-for-word produces something that is meaningless. Metaphors show that meaning is primary to form.

Of course, this means that the translator must be able to determine whether or not a phrase is in fact a metaphor. The NIV of Ps 17:8 reads, "Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings." Notice the use of "keep" to convey the idea of affection. I was shocked when I first read the CSB on this verse. "Protect me as the pupil of your eye." The fact of the matter is that the Hebrew word does mean "pupil" (כְּאִישׁוֹן בַּת־עָיִן, κόραν ὀφθαλμοῦ), and if it is not a metaphor then a verb like "protect" is more likely.

IDIOMS

Finally, from metaphors we move to idioms, and everyone agrees that they cannot be translated word-for-word, and all translations become functional at this point.

In order to say that God is patient, Hebrew says that he has a "long nose (אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם)," brought into the KJV with the phrase "longsuffering," and newer translations as "slow to anger." But the Hebrew author never meant to convey the idea that God has a protruding proboscis. It is an idiom, which means that the meanings of the individual words do not add up to the meaning of the phrase. In other words, it would be misleading to translate word-for-word; we have to translate the meaning conveyed by the words. So what would be a "literal" translation of אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם be?

The common phrase εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, and its emphatic form εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, are dynamically translated "forever" and "for ever and ever." "Into the age" and "into the ages of ages" is a reflection of the Jewish concept of time, which includes more than a quantitative element — forever — but also a qualitative element — life in the Messianic Age. All translators are traitors, and this phrase is significantly under-translated; but that's the nature of translation, and it does illustrate the impossibility of

producing a finished translation that is word-for-word and one that people will actually read and understand.[7]

CONCLUSION

The word "literal" should never be used in a discussion of translation because it is so readily misunderstood. But if used, it should be used accurately. A "literal" translation has very little to do with form. A "literal" translation is one that conveys the meaning of the original text into the receptor language without exaggeration or embellishment.

For translators on other committees, please follow the lead of the NET and NIV, and in the footnotes say "Greek," not "Literally."

For pastors, please help your people understand that what they want is a Bible that accurately conveys the meaning of the original author in an understandable, modern idiom, and this always takes interpretation.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

On a final note, I want to quickly reflect on the human desire to resist change. We all belong to various social groups, and each social group has identity markers. For the Jews, it was circumcision and Sabbath keeping (at a minimum). For many Christians, an identity marker is which translation you use.

What is difficult about this sociological fact is that when a person questions the identity marker of another, often the argument is not really about the identity marker but about defending the social group. The most salient example I can think of is the aggressive and ignorant defense of the King James Version as being the only inspired translation, or not being a translation at all but rather being the pure word of God— so

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[7] Translating idioms is almost impossible for any type of translation, but especially for a formal equivalent. We would never say "cover your feet" for using the toilet, or "having in the womb" for being pregnant—except in an interlinear. Most idioms do not have even approximate equivalents and hence cannot be translated word-for-word.

they say. Forget the fact that English wasn't a language until the second millennium, and even Tyndale's English is often a mystery to the modern reader. I suspect that the vehemence of the argument has little to do with a theory of translation that wants to keep archaic language and secondary Greek manuscripts, and it has more to do with the person's social identity as a member of the KJV-only culture. Hopefully, our discussion of the ESV, CSB, and NIV will not fall prey to the same issues.

I say this to ask your indulgence, and to ask you to take the time to truly evaluate the word "literal" and the misconceptions that surround it. Even if you disagree with points in this paper, we can agree that we should us terminology that is accurate, drawing on the basic meaning of those terms, and that we should not use words that have significant misunderstandings attached to it (kind of like Jesus not wanting to use the term "Messiah"). Let's not use terminology that easily misleads people in their understanding of the trustworthiness of their Bible.