

CONSIDERATIONS OF ENGLISH STYLE

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I. Various Influences on the English Style of Translations

The other panelists this morning are actually dealing with subjects that are related to the topic which has been assigned for this paper, "Considerations of English Style." The questions which they are primarily concerned can, of course, rightly be treated independently of style; but it should be recognized that every important aspect of the work of translation has a bearing on the style of a version. If a translator were concerned solely about English style, if he were not influenced by other than purely stylistic considerations, he might freely follow his own preferences in questions of language and style. But other matters may significantly influence his style, sometimes subtly and almost imperceptibly, and at other times manifestly. Among them are (1) the nature of the basic text which is chosen, whether it be a full, smooth, conflate type or one of a terser nature; (2) the kind of rendering favored, whether it be, for example, word-for-word, thought-for-thought, or a combination of the two; and (3) the choice of some special objective such as to accommodate readers who are just learning English or who live in a certain geographical region. Other major considerations which influence style, often without the translator's awareness, are his theological viewpoint, his attitude toward the work which he is translating, and his understanding of it. In the case of the translation of the Bible there can be no substitute for spiritual sensitivity and spiritual understanding.

We must not linger, however, over matters which are appropriately being considered independently of style, however much influence they may exert on style. We must rather concentrate on subjects which are more conventionally dealt with under the topic which has been assigned to this paper.

II. The Stylistic Aims of Translators

We must, in the first place, give attention to certain objectives in the area of language and style which have been expressed by translators. It will be necessary for us to be selective and brief. Any who might be interested in a further treatment of this and other subjects with which we shall deal are referred to a more extensive study made by the writer,¹ some portions of which will be included in this paper.

One point which has been made by a great many translators has been that versions should be clear and intelligible to the common people. The Reformation brought a renewed and vigorous interest in making the Scriptures available in the vernacular languages in a direct and simple style that could speak to the heart and the understanding of the ordin-

1. "The Translation of the New Testament into English, 1881—1950: Studies in Language and Style," 1961. Ph.D. dissertation available through University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

ary man. Tyndale, for example, according to the familiar account, when contending with a man of learning who asserted that we might better be without the laws of God than those of the pope, declared, "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou doest."² And it was Tyndale who, in terms of Westcott's tribute; "fixed the type according to which the later labourers worked. His influence decided that our Bible should be popular and not literary, speaking in a simple dialect, and that so by its simplicity it should be endowed with permanence."³

Of a different order from Tyndale and from the great tradition of simplicity and intelligibility which has distinguished the main line of English versions is the Rheims-Douay Version with its latinate element. The preface to the Rhemish New Testament indicates that that version is willing at times to sacrifice ready intelligibility and clarity to what it regards as faithfulness. It is not averse to introducing terms which may at first seem strange to the ordinary reader, but which may have an educative value. It would justify such renderings or transliterations as Parasceve, Pasche, Azymes, bread of Proposition, Didragmes, Depositum, exinanited, and refflorished. It would not soften hard places in the text or disdain all ambiguities: "Moreover, we presume not in hard places to mollifie the speaches or phrases, but religiously keepe them word for word, and point for point, for feare of missing, or restraining the sense of the holy Ghost to our phantasie, as Eph. 6. *Against the spirituals of wickedness in the celestials* . . . and I Pet. 2. *As infants euen now borne, reasonable, milke without guile desire ye*, We do so place *reasonable*, of purpose, that it may be indifferent both to infants going before, as in our Latin text: or to milke that foloweth after, as in other Latin copies and in the Greek. . . ."⁴

One can be thankful that Tyndale prevailed rather than Rheims in its latinate strain in matters of language and style, but it should be acknowledged that the educative aim of the Rhemish version has not been completely unrealized. And that version did enrich the vocabulary reservoir on which the Authorized Version was to draw.

The Authorized Version would have none of what its preface calls "the obscuritie of the Papists."⁵ Its desire was that "the Scripture may speake like it selfe, as in the language of *Canaan*, that it may be understood even of the very vulgar."⁶ It stands firmly in the Tyndale tradition,

2. See the account in Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General View of the History of the English Bible* (3rd ed. rev. William Aldis Wright; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
4. Alfred W. Pollard, ed., *Records of the English Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911) pp. 308f.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 376.
6. *Idem.*

joined to Tyndale by a line of revisions, and conspicuously makes use of Tyndale's work.⁷

The present period of English versions of the Bible was introduced in 1881 by the New Testament of the English Revised Version. This work sincerely aspired after clarity and intelligibility and endeavored, as its preface declares, to continue the great succession of versions or revisions which began with the work of Tyndale and culminated in the Authorized Version. A member of its New Testament company in his *Companion to the Revised Version of the New Testament* eloquently stated the case for intelligibility: "... the Bible is, above all other volumes, the *people's book*, and... if possible, not a single expression should be left in any translation of it which is at all likely to stumble or perplex the plainest reader."⁸

Since 1881 there has been a ceaseless flow of translations, especially of the New Testament in whole or in part, many of them in what has been considered up-to-date English intelligible to all. Translator after translator has aimed after simplicity, contemporaneity, and intelligibility of expression. In this the direct influence of the Tyndale tradition may to an extent still be felt. But some credit might also be given to the powerful advocacy of the necessity of revision and clarification which produced the English and the American Revised versions. Furthermore, the rather widespread feeling that the revised versions did not meet the need which they recognized and publicized may well have moved other translators to seek to supply that need.

However, an important additional influence should be noted. About the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth the affinity between the Greek of the New Testament and the vernacular, informal, non-literary, spoken Greek of its day came in for recognition and emphasis.⁹ and even over-emphasis.¹⁰ Translators of our period were encouraged by this conception of the nature of the Greek of the New Testament to seek to mirror in the language and the style of their English versions the nature of the popular, non-literary Greek of the Hellenistic

7. See. J. Isaacs, "The Sixteenth-Century English Versions," *The Bible in its Ancient and English Versions*, ed. H. Wheeler Robinson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 149, and Charles C. Butterworth, *The Literary Lineage of the King James Bible* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941), pp. 230f.
8. Alex. Roberts, *Companion to the Revised Version of the New Testament* (New York: Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co., [1881]), p. 109.
9. See the following: A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (4th ed.; New York: George H. Doran Co., [1923]), pp. 49-139, and "Language of the New Testament (Greek)," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, III, 1826-32; G. Adolph Disssmann, *Bible Studies*, tr. Alexander Grieve (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901); James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*; Vol. I, *Prolegomena* (3rd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908).
10. For a well-balanced appraisal of the Greek of the New Testament see J. Gresham Machen, *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), pp. 1-6.

period. *The Twentieth Century New Testament*,¹¹ for example, noted that the New Testament was not written in classical Greek, but in the spoken Greek of its time and that those whose words are recorded in it are represented as using the diction of ordinary life. Accordingly this version would use only current English, except in poetical sections, in citations of the Old Testament, and in prayer. It would make it possible for Englishmen to read the New Testament in the form of English which they commonly use. Goodspeed likewise has argued that since recent discoveries and researches have shown that the New Testament was written not in classical Greek, nor in a "biblical," Septuagint Greek, or in the literary Greek of the Hellenistic period, an English translation of the New Testament will most appropriately make use of everyday language marked by simplicity and directness. He finds that the authors of the New Testament in the main had little concern for studied rhetoric and art in their writings. His aim has been to produce a version which would reflect the natural, direct, unpretentious, but vigorous, character of the original.¹²

For one reason or another, then, translators in the present period as well as translators of an earlier day have stressed the virtues of clarity, simplicity, and intelligibility of style, of speaking to the plowboy not in inhorn terms,¹³ but in language which he could understand.

It must not be thought that the conspicuous advocacy of the stylistic virtues just mentioned implies that translators have given no attention to other meritorious traits of style. Earlier translators had a remarkable instinct for appropriateness, felicity, and effectiveness of expression, and translators of the present period have not been utterly indifferent to them. The English Revised Version, for one, was prepared by men who had some appreciation for the varied stylistic virtues of the Authorized Version: "We have had to study this great Version carefully and minutely, line by line; and the longer we have been engaged upon it the more we have learned to admire its simplicity, its dignity, its power, its happy turns of expression... and we must not fail to add, the music of its cadences, and the felicities of its rhythm."¹⁴

In *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament*¹⁵ Luther A. Weigle holds that the English and American Revised versions were defective in being too literal and in having lost some of the beauty and power of the Authorized Version. He provides

11. *The Twentieth Century New Testament: A Translation into Modern English* (London: Mowbray House). The first part of a "Tentative Edition," containing the five historical books, was published in 1898. The second part, containing the Apostle Paul's Letters to the Churches, appeared in 1900, and the New Testament was completed in 1901 with the publication of the third part. The entire work was published in revised form in one volume in 1902 and in 1904.
12. See the preface to Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The New Testament: An American Translation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, [1923]).
13. Cf. Westcott, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
14. From the Anglo-American Edition: Fac-simile of the Cambridge Edition, p. 1x.
15. Members of the Revision Committee, Luther A. Weigle, chairman, *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament*, [1946].

important information about the viewpoint of the committee which prepared the RSV New Testament:

A requirement that has constantly been kept in mind by the present Committee is that the Bible should be translated into language that is euphonious, readable, and suited for use in public and private worship. It must sound well, and be easy to read aloud and in public. The choice of words and ordering of phrases must be such as to avoid harsh collocations of sound, and consonantal juxtapositions over which tongues will trip and lisp. . . .

Much even of the prose of the King James Bible has the beauty, and something of the rhythm, of poetry. . . .

For use in public and private worship, it is not necessary that the language of the English Bible be stiff or strange or antique, or that it convey the impression of a self-conscious effort to be reverent. But it must not be irreverent, and it must not be colloquial or trivial. For use in worship the Bible must be cast, not in what is merely the language of today, but in enduring and simple diction which is worthy to stand in the great tradition of Tyndale and the King James Version.¹⁶

Walter Russell Bowie in the same *Introduction* maintains that a version of the Scriptures to be acceptable must have a form and cadence that will "speak home" to the souls of men. The Authorized Version "falls rightly on the ear"; the meaning of its words gives the impression of having been "set to music." He grants that in the English of the twentieth century it is hard to catch the melody and the "majestic diapason" of Shakespeare's day; but he holds that there are different types of beauty, and he commends a "new kind of beauty," a "functional beauty, which is the expression of purpose in the most vital and, therefore, the most fitting form." He would have it said for the "makers of this translation that they have tried to make it a sensitive transmission of the immortal themes of the New Testament to this generation's mind and heart and ear."¹⁷

The preface to the *Letchworth Version* of the New Testament¹⁸ expresses among other things appreciation for the literary qualities of the Authorized Version, but it notes that not a few people have difficulty in understanding that version, for it is marked by archaic words and outmoded syntax. The *Letchworth Version*, we are told, "has been prepared in the belief that there is still room for a version in current English, free from old-fashioned words and unfamiliar grammar, free also from colloquialisms and slang expressions; a version which follows the original closely, paraphrasing only where necessity dictates; one which seeks above all to maintain the simple, dignified style of writing which

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 57f.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 61 ff.

18. T. F. Ford and R. E. Ford, *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: The Letchworth Version in Modern English* Letchworth, Herts: Letchworth Printers, 1948.

has for so long been associated with the Scriptures in English.”¹⁹ This version, it is said, uses chiefly Anglo-Saxon words rather than those of classical derivation. Certain words of Latin origin, however, have been retained, words like justification, remission, and propitiation which have become indispensable in Christian theology and cannot be replaced by simpler substitutes. The reason that this version may sound familiar is that “close translation can hardly avoid some resemblance to the traditional form of words hallowed in the ears of generations of Christian people ever since the New Testament was turned into English by William Tyndale.”²⁰

E. V. Rieu in his introduction to his translation of the Gospels²¹ writes with much conviction about the artistic character of the Greek Gospels. His statement of the case serves as a corrective to wrong inferences which might be drawn from the fact that the New Testament was written to a considerable extent in the popular, everyday Greek of its time. There is a danger that translators in their preoccupation with the fact that the New Testament was in the main not written in the literary type of Greek of its day, which was at times artificially imitative of classical Greek, will be insensitive to the excellence of the New Testament as literature and will do less than justice to the dignity and sublimity of the original.

Rieu is aware of elements in the New Testament which would seem strange to cosmopolitan readers of its time. He considers it appropriate to use old-fashioned English in rendering citations from the Septuagint and has attempted to represent a Semitic element in Luke by using an English style not entirely that of our times. In a discussion with J. B. Phillips on the subject of translating the Gospels,²² he contends that the language used in the Gospels was not a “debased” Greek. He holds that the Gospels were composed not for the “man in the street” but for the “man in the congregation,” and he would not want to “write down” to him. He does not regard it as the translator’s task to paraphrase or reduce his standards of English to make things absolutely clear to the “man in the street.” He maintains that whatever was the character of the Greek which the writer of the Gospels used—and he will not grant that it was debased—the result is work of the highest art. In his words:

... the Greek Gospels are unique, both in their spiritual content and as works of literary art. They are majestic, and I think we must strive to convey this effect in the best contemporary English at our command, and never to write it down. Nor must we forget one thing, which I have not yet mentioned, and that is the rhythm that runs through all of them. I was deeply impressed by that, and in my attempts to reproduce it, I found the best way was to read my translation aloud, and, when I’d

19. *Ibid.*, p. iii.

20. *Ibid.*, p. iv.

21. E. V. Rieu, *The Four Gospels* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1952).

22. “Translating the Gospels, A Discussion Between Dr. E. V. Rieu and the Rev. J. B. Phillips,” *The Bible Translator*, 6:4 (1955), 150-59.

read it aloud once, to read it aloud again, to competent critics sitting by me with pencils and notebooks in their hands, ready to shoot at me when I had finished.²³

In the period since 1881, then, there has been, as we have noticed, a very extensive effort to translate the New Testament into simple, current English, at times into a plain everyday grade of language regarded as intelligible to all. But attention has also been given especially by certain translators to such virtues as appropriateness, felicity, and effectiveness of style.

III. Basic Approaches Used by Translators

To achieve their objectives in language and style translators, whether singly or in companies, have in general followed two courses. One has been to translate afresh, even in the case of some to the complete or almost complete ignoring of previous translation work. Thus, Ferrar Fenton, one of the translators who introduced the present period,²⁴ had no interest in revision or even study of other men's work. He read the New Testament for about forty years in no language but Greek. His aim was to ascertain the meaning of the Scriptures from the writers of Scripture alone. Of set purpose he avoided consulting or utilizing the work of other translators or revisers. Goodspeed likewise tells us that he did not wish simply to reissue the older well-known versions. The impression generally held that the modern translator merely attempts to modernize the phraseology of the Authorized Version is, he maintains, quite faulty. Actually, he asserts, the modern translator rarely looks at the Authorized Version.²⁵ Moffatt, to mention another example, did not have before him as he prepared his New Translation²⁶ any other version than his own *Historical New Testament*,²⁷ but his *New Translation* is not a revision even of that earlier work—it is an independent version. Naturally translators who prefer a much freer type of rendering than was made in distinguished earlier versions or revisions have at times found it more satisfactory for their purposes to translate afresh rather than to revise.

Another approach has been, of course, that of revision. This method was followed in the great succession between Tyndale and the Authorized Version, which itself was a revision. The English Revised Version, the American Revised Version, and numerous other works in the present period are likewise revisions. One of the most successful of the versions

23. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

24. *The New Testament* (London, 1895 or 1896). Revised edition, 1900: *The New Testament in Modern English*. Unless other documentation is given for the views of translators, see the prefatory material in their versions.

25. For Goodspeed's views on translation see *New Chapters in New Testament Study* (New York: Macmillian Co., 1937), pp. 75-126, *The Making of the English New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), and *Problems of New Testament Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1945]).

26. James Moffatt: *The New Testament: A New Translation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913)

27. *The Historical New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901).

of our times from the stylistic point of view is the Letchworth Version, which is really a light revision of the Authorized Version.

IV. The Stylistic Accomplishments of Translators

The virtues of the language and style of earlier celebrated English versions of the Bible have already been mentioned. Some attention, however, might profitably be given now to certain traits of the language and style of versions of the present period. Translators since 1881 in general, have succeeded in writing in up-to-date English. Archaic and obsolete forms and expressions have usually been avoided. Translators, however, have often favored retaining old second-person singular forms in prayer addressed to God the Father. The prevailing preference has been for simplicity in diction. A quite limited use has been made of long words. In a study of the practice in this respect of twenty-one versions, chiefly from the period since 1881, but including AV, ERV, ARV, and a form of the Rheims-Challoner text,²⁸ the present writer found that in fifteen selected passages these versions made on the average a very sparing use of longer words. The number of words of just one or two syllables averaged about ninety-five out of every hundred. The number of words of four or more syllables averaged only about one in a hundred. An examination of the sparingly used longer words confirmed the impression that there was little tendency to ornateness of diction, although a non-popular element has entered the vocabulary of certain versions.²⁹ A sampling pointed to the Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic origin of much of the vocabulary.³⁰ A further study indicated that there has been a remarkable recurrence in subsequent versions of words of three or more syllables used in the Authorized Version.³¹ This would suggest that for all their efforts at modernity of expression and at intelligibility to our contemporaries recent translators in a good many instances are unable to find any words that better suit their purposes than those which have been in use since at least 1611, and it might caution us against overstating the case for the modern man's difficulties with the diction of the older versions.

There has been some tendency in recent versions toward simplicity in sentence structure and a preference for shorter sentences than are found in the Authorized Version. Thus at Colossians 1:3-8, where AV, ERV, ARV, and a considerable number of other versions have only one sentence, an almost equally large number of versions considered have used three or more sentences, one using as many as nine.³² Modern punctuation and sense paragraphs have often been employed to good effect in assisting the reader to understand the text.

Translators in the current period have had a reasonable degree of

28. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 448ff.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 539-633.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 634-37.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 638-808.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 349-51.

success in attaining contemporaneity and simplicity of expression, but they have by no means always been successful in achieving the clarity and intelligibility which they have sought.

It is probably, however, in respect to such qualities as appropriateness, felicity, and effectiveness of expression that the greatest deficiencies of many recent versions, though not indeed all, will be found. Harshness and awkwardness in the sound and cadence, monotony in the length of sentences, aridity, prosiness, inappropriate expressions out of tone with the context, form which draws attention from content to itself, as in the use of objectionable alliteration and assonance, trite diction which does an injustice to the freshness and vigor of the original, and diction of different grades unnaturally mixed—these and other defects are too frequent in versions of the present period. Too often, it will be noticed, versions which have broken sharply with the Authorized Version in type of rendering have suffered in music and power.

V. Assistance for Future Translators

The record of the accomplishments and deficiencies of the translations of our period offers much instruction to the translators of the future. It would counsel them, for example, really to struggle to achieve clarity and to avoid ambiguity and confusion. It would not, however, encourage them to remove from the Scriptures teachings which are difficult for the natural man nor to abandon completely an educative goal. It would commend an unaffected, unpatronizing, and consistent simplicity of expression, an adequate vocabulary, not hampered by artificial limitations or aims of a too restricted type, it would favor modern punctuation, sense-paragraphing, and other devices to assist the reader in understanding the text. With urgency it would advise very careful attention to fitness and appropriateness of diction and a sensitive effort to effect the dignity, the sublimity, and the general character of the style of the original. To be avoided, the record would instruct translators, are jarring mixtures of the colloquial and the solemn or literary, conspicuous alliteration, unconscious rhymes, and other matters of form when they attract undue attention from the content to themselves, and prosy or overused expressions which weigh down and deaden the style. The interest of late in a "timeless" rather than a merely contemporary English, with its stylistic eccentricities, which may soon become "dated," might well commend itself to translators who would like their work to survive as more than a monument to the usage and taste of a period. Translators might also be instructed in the advisability of writing not only for private reading, but also for the more demanding service of public reading.

A final word might be said about the advisability of the translator's taking into account the work that has been done not only in the period since 1881, but also in an earlier day. There is much, for example, in the Authorized Version that is "inevitable" and "timeless" and that recurs

in subsequent translations. If it be true, as Goodspeed has said, that the modern translator rarely looks at the King James Bible, a change of approach is necessary. The literary gifts that made the Bible truly distinguished in style were the property of no one man, but were those of a period or an era united to produce a work of unique excellence. Certainly the accomplishments of the past should not be ignored, but should be warmly and freely appropriated.

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