"Signing Off" Versus "Giving Input": The Changing Role of Bible Translation Consulting in the 21st Century

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Abstract: Historically, translations of the Bible have been checked by recognized Bible Translation Consultants to verify their faithfulness (accuracy, clarity, and naturalness) prior to publication. Bible agency publishers have often required an approval from a translation consultant (a.k.a. sign off) before considering a manuscript ready to publish. However, the global landscape in Bible translation has changed dramatically with the growth and maturation of the Church in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Also the number of active Bible translation projects around the world has grown beyond the capacity of the world's translation consultants to serve them in a timely way. This has led to confrontational assertions of church ownership of translations independent of the Bible agencies and to ill-conceived experiments to address the systemic shortcomings. This paper reexamines the assumptions underlying our system of translation checking and recasts them for a new day. The historic checking system was developed when the Bible agencies controlled the entire process of Bible translation and publication. Today translation work is increasingly accomplished through interdependent, international partnerships. The consultant's contribution is better framed as collegial review and input, similar to the best practices of academic writing.

Keywords: Consulting, Bible Translation, Power, Post-Colonialism

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of the Bible translation movement has changed profoundly over the last fifty years. The growth of the Church in the Global South, both numerically and in spiritual vitality, is well-documented and represents a changed reality for all of us who have committed ourselves to this work. The Seed Company was founded in 1993 to respond to the recognition that there were new players in the field of Bible Translation, speakers of the world's smaller languages, who could play a leading role in translating God's Word into their respective languages. In 1993, we viewed the

new players on the field primarily as *individuals*. Today we are seeing *organizations*, such as church denominations, local and international mission societies, who are also pressing to join the team committed to bringing God's message to the nations in the languages of their hearts. The global landscape emphasizing partnership has put pressure on systems and processes for Bible translation which were developed in an earlier era. It also challenges the assumptions that we as lifelong participants in the Bible translation movement bring to our work.

In this paper, I explicate some of the foundational assumptions which have informed our work as Bible translation consultants and compare those assumptions with the realities of our changed context, with special attention to what I see as strategic mismatches between them. I will close with a proposal for recasting how we think about what we do to better align with where we are now in the history of Bible translation and the Church at large.

SIGNING OFF

Assumptions are often only partially explicated in our consciousness. We tend to act on them even when we do not always articulate them clearly. Sometimes we use metaphors to stand in for the propositional assumptions which drive our decisions. This is as true in our experience in Bible translation as it is in our whole experience of life. Lakoff and Johnson note:

> "We have found…that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action…The concepts that govern our thought…also govern our everyday functioning down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3).

A metaphor that has powerfully shaped our understanding of translation consulting is drawn from the manufacturing world. We have conceived of our work as a kind of Quality Control function, whereby we as consultants assure ourselves, the translation teams, our organizations, the proposed publishers of a Bible, and the Church at large that a given translation is a faithful rendering of the original message. In the wider manufacturing sector, quality control officers examine the products of a manufacturing process to assure stakeholders that they meet standards of quality as defined by the manufacturer. They then "sign off" on the quality of the product they have examined. The consultant check has served a similar function for translations of the Bible for decades and we have adopted similar language in talking about what we do.

Effective Quality Control efforts share certain common features:

1. A single entity is normally in charge of the process of production from start to finish. That entity uses quality control to ensure its products meet agreed-upon standards.

2. The metrics defining quality are clear.
3. Quality metrics are consistently applied, yielding uniformly reliable results.
4. The quality control check happens, at least, at the end of the production process. (While *Total Quality Management* maintains that responsibility for quality assurance resides throughout an organization and its manufacturing processes, there is always a final review before the product is released.)[1] It would be impossible to assure the quality of a product which was significantly modified after the last quality control check.

The quality control metaphor reflects an era when the Bible agencies held a monopoly-like position in Bible translation ministry. The global Church, with few exceptions, implicitly delegated to the Bible agencies the responsibility to service the Bible translation needs of the world's language communities, large and small. Those agencies forged common understandings about how faithfulness of translations was to be maintained and what the role of translation consultants should be in the process. The great challenge for us as Bible translation consultants is to recognize that, today, there are a number of critical mismatches in our practices, our assumptions, and our capacity, which call into question our continued reliance on the quality control metaphor as a way of understanding our work.

Mismatches in Our Practice

The way that translation checking actually happens today within the wider circle of Bible agencies has considerably more variation than is implied by the Quality Control metaphor. Although we often talk about the consultant check in terms of quality control, the reality is that what is checked and how it is checked varies considerably. In my early years as a corporate officer in SIL International, I was astonished to discover that some of the features of consultant checks which I had understood to be non-negotiable, distinctive features of SIL consultant checks in Indonesia were optional in the practice of SIL consultants working in other parts of the world. The presence of uninitiated native speakers to verify the comprehensibility of the translation is routinely expected by some consultants, but not by others. Some consultants insist on written back translations prepared ahead of the check, while others are comfortable examining a translation through a dynamic interaction based on oral back translation. Some are willing to conduct a consultant check by correspondence, while others regard that practice is grossly

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[1] "Total Quality Management," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total_quality_management (last accessed January 8, 2020).

irresponsible. For some, the consultant check is best done right before the manuscript is submitted for typesetting, such that the consultant signs off that the manuscript is ready for publication. For others, the consultant check occurs earlier in the process of translation, giving church leaders the opportunity for further revision before typesetting and publication. If revisions are made after the consultant check, some consultants insist on reviewing them before signing off, others do not. Some consultants have learned to check multiple translations of the same text in group checking sessions, while others find the prospect daunting to say the least.

Other variations in the practice of translation checking have to do with our understanding of translation theory. The range of acceptable implicit information made explicit in a translation differs from consultant to consultant. Consultants vary on how heavily they lean toward specific exegetical choices in various biblical passages. Bible translators have often been exasperated by receiving conflicting advice from different consultants looking at the same key terms or reviewing closely parallel passages. All this points to a significant human element in the task of translation checking that reflects more individual preference than is popularly ascribed to our checking processes.

Mismatches in Our Assumptions

The Bible agencies have for decades provided what is essentially an outsourced service for the global Church. We were regarded as having the expertise to manage and execute translation programs and produce faithful translations and the Church at large expected us to fulfill our stewardships on their behalf. As a result, most of us in the translation consultant community have grown up regarding the Bible translation task as a job for which we were uniquely qualified. When other groups proposed to do Bible translation, we have tended as a professional community to look askance (to put it mildly).

In the last ten years, I have observed a profound growth in the number of Christian ministries, be they churches or parachurch organizations, who are initiating and executing Bible translation projects. There is a broader appreciation for the effectiveness of translations of Scripture in the language of the heart. There is also a burgeoning impatience on the part of some ministries at the apparent slowness of the Bible agencies to meet what they perceive has been a longstanding, unmet global need. A small but growing group of ministries are championing the cause of *church-centric Bible translation*. The movement's most passionate advocates assert that the local church has the *right* and the *capacity* to meet its own need for a translation of the Bible and to determine when those translations are faithful. They pursue, almost defiantly, Bible translation projects without any reference to the Bible agencies.

Related to this, the advent of desktop publishing technology has empowered local communities to produce camera-ready versions of their translations which they can duplicate and bind using their own resources, without reference to the traditional publishers of Bible products. As a result, parachurch ministries and churches do not feel the same need to engage with the Bible agencies as they once did.

Finally, international Bible agencies such as SIL and the Seed Company are in a socially weakened position to assert control of the global Bible translation process in a mature post-colonial world. For organizations with North American or European heritage to tell people from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, "We are the ones qualified to determine if translations of Scripture done in your country are faithful" is repellant to those for whom the recollections of their national colonial experience are still fresh.

All this is to say, we need to recognize that more and more translation projects are being executed in multi-agency partnerships which include Bible agencies and other Christian ministry partners. In those contexts, translation consultants from particular organizations risk much when they assume for themselves the controlling role of evaluating the faithfulness of translations done in the collaborative endeavor.

Mismatch in Capacity

Implicit in the quality control metaphor is that the manufacturing entity provides sufficient infrastructure to evaluate the quality of its products in line with its rate of production. In the case of the global Bible translation endeavor, we have long recognized that the growth of the Bible translation enterprise has far outrun the capacity of the translation consultant community to service it in a timely way. Anecdotes of translation teams whose translations have sat for months or even years waiting for a consultant check are widespread and legendary. "Just be patient" is a message that rests on the assumption that we in the Bible agencies control the process and can service the needs in line with our capacity. In situations where we no longer control the processes, that message is less appropriate and certainly less welcome. Our persistent inability to service Bible translation projects in a timely way undercuts our credibility, damages trust, and threatens the role of our organizations in the global Bible translation enterprise in the 21st century.

An Alternative Metaphor—The Collegial Review

In this changing context, where our historic role as primary reviewers of faithfulness in translations is being challenged, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that

we are no longer perceived to be relevant. In a recent conversation with an advocate of church-centric Bible translation, I was confronted with the question: *If this works, won't you be out of a job?* The short answer to the question was, *Not at all!* As long as Bible translation is being done, Bible translation experts, who through their education and experience understand the challenges of faithfully rendering the biblical message in other languages, will be a treasured human resource for the Church. Our challenge is not that we have no role in the evolving world of Bible translation, but that our role needs to change in line with the times.

One way of framing our new role is to think about it as a *collegial review.* In academic writing, it is common for a scholar to share a written piece with various colleagues and ask their honest feedbacks or comments before submitting the piece for publication. In my experience, the more critical and detailed the feedback, the more helpful it has been in guiding my revisions and improving the paper.

In the same way, we need to frame our roles in translation checking as a collegial review, giving input to help colleagues (the translation teams) make their translations better. This kind of input is generally welcomed by the translation team. In the context of our multi-agency partnerships, we need to share with teammates that this kind of review is crucial to the process of revising and improving translations. The difference in role is more than a slight nuance. We embrace the fact that we are no longer in control and are not in a position of giving approval. Instead, we are sharing based on our experience and the translation team is invited to consider the input as they do their next revision.

I have found that approaching a translation check as a collegial review does not change the mechanics of what I have actually done in the check. It is virtually the same. Far from being a problem, the fact that different translation consultants vary in the type of input they give is embraced as a natural function of different giftings and experiences. It is up to the translation team to incorporate the input they have received according to their own best lights.

The influence the consultant has grows with the value that the translation team gives her input. The more highly the team regards the consultant, the more likely her input will be incorporated to improve the translation.

Who can do a collegial review? Ultimately, in the context of today's multi-agency partnerships, *this choice is at the discretion of the translation team or the partnership.* The most important thing is to impart the vital role collegial reviews play in the improvement of translations. The better informed the reviewer, the more useful his input will be. In this light, Bible translation consultants, as experts in the field, are potentially the most helpful reviewers that a translation team can have. However, in light of the shortage of translation consultants in comparison to the need, we Bible translation experts would do a great service to our cause by deliberately equipping others to share in the load of reviewing translations and giving timely input to translation teams.

Hard Power and Soft Power

Another way of talking about the difference in our historic translation practice (*signing off*) and the attitudinal adjustment I propose (*giving input*) is in terms of hard power and soft power. Joseph Nye wrote an influential book on foreign affairs in which he categorized a nation's behavior in international relations in terms of hard power and soft power (Nye 2004). Hard power is the ability to *coerce*, through military and economic means. Soft power is the ability to *influence*, to winsomely draw others to voluntarily choose to do what you would like them to do. A nation's soft power lies in the extent to which its culture, values, ideas, and institutions are admired and attractive to others.

Applying these concepts to translation checking, when a translation consultant regards a translation check as an exercise in quality control or "signing off," he is exerting hard power in his relationship with the translation team. The message, whether articulated or not, is, "I have the power to judge your work as worthy or unworthy of publication." This can come across as coercive and risks damaging the relationship the translation team has with their consultant, particularly when the translation team is from a partner organization from the Global South.

On the other hand, when a translation consultant regards his contribution in a translation checking session as a collegial review, i.e. "giving input," she is exercising soft power, influencing a translation team to embrace her values and willingly revise their translation in line with her comments.

Exercising hard power may create a short-term win in that a translation team will knuckle under and comply because they feel they have no choice. However, it damages (or burns) a relational bridge in the long-term and inclines the translation team to avoid going back to that consultant in the future. Ultimately, the more you use hard power, the less influence you have. On the other hand, exercising soft power by giving input is winsome and catalytic. The more you use it, the more trust you build with colleagues and partners, and the more your influence and credibility grows.

Concluding Sentiments

All of us who are Jesus followers long to emulate him in our relationships with others, including the translation teams whose work we review. I close with these pertinent words of Jesus:

> Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42–45).

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