

SUMMARY OF BIBLE TRANSLATION THEORY

What makes a good translation of Scripture from the original languages, Hebrew and Greek, to other languages such as English, Spanish, etc.? Is it better for the translation to be more faithful word-for-word to the original text or to the meaning of the original text? Today, the two major theories are known as the Word for Word (or formal equivalence) and Phrase for Phrase (or dynamic equivalence).

The following key questions help explain the differences between the two theories:

1. What is a Word for Word translation (also known as Formal or Complete Equivalence)?

Formal or complete equivalence types of translations are also known as literal or word-for-word translations of the Scripture. The Blue Letter Bible¹ website states,

"...the idea behind formal equivalence is to render the text in the same form as the original. This can also mean using the same word order as the original language. With formal equivalence, each word of the original language is represented by a word in the target or receptor language. Examples of formal equivalence in translations would be the American Standard Version of 1901, the New American Standard Bible, and the English Standard Version. A more literal or formal translation is one that can be excellent for Bible study. It allows the person to interpret the Scriptures for themselves. Because care is taken to render the text as close as possible to the original, it makes it easier to study the Scripture in a formal translation."

2. What are some key drawbacks associated with Word for Word translations?

One of the drawbacks of the formal translation is that it is not as readable as a thought-for-thought or phrase-for-phrase translation. Often the formal translation comes across as wooden in the language to which it is converted and, therefore, hard to understand for contemporary readers of that language.

We must also understand that no translation can be completely literal all of the time. In no language can we substitute one word for another word

¹ www.blueletterbible.org

exactly from the original Hebrew or Greek and keep the meaning the same. The Blue Letter Bible² writers explain it like this:

“If the Scripture were to be translated in a literal, or word-for-word, manner in every passage, then the result would often be something that was unreadable or non-understandable. Idioms have to be explained – not translated word-for-word.”

3. Are literal translations good, accurate, and correct?

The answer to the question above is “yes, all of the above.” Literal translations are great! The literal translations most people would recognize currently include:

- King James Version (KJV)
- New King James Version (NKJV)
- New American Standard Bible (NASB) (1995 and 2020)
- English Standard Version (ESV)

All of the aforementioned versions are translated in a literal, word-for-word manner. Do all read the same? Mostly, but not completely.

4. What is a Phrase-for-Phrase translation (also known as Dynamic or Functional Equivalence)?

Dynamic or functional equivalence types of translations translate the original text in a phrase-for-phrase or sometimes even in a thought-for-thought manner. The Blue Letter Bible³ website refers to these translations in the following way:

“It [the dynamic translation] is not so much concerned about the grammatical form of the original language as it is the thought or meaning of the original language. The dynamic translation wants to bring across the meaning of the original. It does not necessarily concern itself about the grammatical form in which it was written. While a literal translation is sometimes difficult to read, a dynamic equivalence translation is usually very understandable. Dynamic equivalence often involves the rewording of expressions and customs that are understood by modern readers.”

5. What are some key drawbacks with Phrase for Phrase translations?

² www.blueletterbible.org

³ www.blueletterbible.org

While these versions offer a more readable, and therefore more understandable, version of Scripture, there are drawbacks. They include the following concerns as addressed by the Blue Letter Bible Writers:

- What if the translator/s are misunderstanding the meaning?

If the translators have misunderstood what the original text was saying, then they will communicate this same misunderstanding to those who read the translation, causing the reader to then assume that the Bible is saying something that it is not saying. Because of this, a dynamic equivalence translation risks being guilty of either adding to or subtracting from the holy Word of God. The main reason for this risk is that, in dynamic equivalence translations, more of the task of interpreting Scripture is taken out of the hands of the reader, and placed instead into the hands of the translator.

- What if the Bible teacher disagrees with the interpretation?

There is a practical problem that can arise for someone who teaches from a dynamic equivalent translation. Given the nature of dynamic equivalence, the teacher is forced to use the thought-for-thought translation that is given in the text. Since dynamic translations contain a large element of interpretation, there may come a time when the teacher disagrees with the way translators interpreted the passage. Most teachers in his place would correct the translation for his pupils, but, if a teacher does so too often, his pupils may come to assume the Bible itself is unreliable, which would not be a desirable outcome.

Because of the above listed concerns regarding the drawbacks for both formal and dynamic equivalence translations, it is the opinion of your pastors that phrase-for-phrase translation should be studied alongside any literal translation of the Scripture.

Some current Phrase for Phrase versions available are:

- New International Version (NIV)
- New Living Translation (NLT)
- Christian Standard Bible (CSB)

Concluding Thoughts:

- Bible translation from one language to another is not a simple process, and requires a certain amount of expertise in the field of linguistics.

- There are two basic methods by which the Scriptures are translated: Word for Word Translation (formal/complete equivalence) and Phrase for Phrase Translation (dynamic/functional equivalence).
- When studying to teach the Scripture, it is best to use a word-for-word translation to study, but one should also utilize the phrase for phrase translations to better understand the meaning.