

# QUALITIES OF A GOOD TRANSLATION

BY

MARYAMU DANBABA

KAMO LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND BIBLE TRANSLATION PROJECTS,  
GOMBE STATE, NIGERIA

[maryamudanbaba2017@gmail.com](mailto:maryamudanbaba2017@gmail.com)

07059503801

A PAPER TO BE PRESENTED AT THE 15<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS OF THE  
NIGERIAN INSTITUTE OF TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS (NITI),  
INTERCONNECT HOTEL, GWARIMPA, ABUJA  
FROM 25<sup>TH</sup>-27<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER, 2017.

## **ABSTRACT**

“Translation is re-telling, as exactly as possible, the meaning of the original message in a way that is natural in the language into which the translation is being made.” A good translation must be accurate, clear, and natural. For a good translation to be marketable, the translation must communicate the meaning of the original message to the new hearers, which is to the people whom the translation is being made to. This means that the translator needs to be thinking constantly of the people for whom he is translating. If a translation fails to give the meaning of what is being translated in a clearer and natural ways, then it is not a good translation. So the paper highlighted the qualities of a good translation that when the steps are followed, it will boost Government revenue.

**Key words:** Translation, Accuracy, Clarity, Naturalness

## **INTRODUCTION**

There are a lot of translations going on in order to produce books in different fields. There are books written in other languages that are translated to other languages in order to get the information clearer in the language from which the books were initially written. In his book, “Training Papers for Bible Translation” Eugene and Rob (2015) noted that, ‘it is possible to translate in different ways for various group of people who speak the same language, this different ways of translating coincide with different social grouping.’ This have been some common kinds that have been used in the past. If Government economy is to be boosted through translation, definitely, the translation must be a very qualitative one and also readable bearing in mind the type of group you are translating to whether they are educated or uneducated, children or adult, from rural or urban areas, so that the people that will be reading your translation will thirsting for your books. Because if the translations are not good, people will not like to buy the books, in which it will become a waste. But a good book that is well translated from the language, in which it was written, will be marketable and it will increase government revenue. In this paper, the discussion solely base on qualities of good translation. The aim of a translator is that people who hear or read the translation should understand, as far as possible, the same message that the hearers of the source message understood. Therefore, a good translation must communicate the meaning of the original message and good translation will boost Government economy, as highlighted in this paper.

## **WHAT IS TRANSLATION?**

Katy (2002) in her book title “Introductory Course in Translation Principles” defines translation as such: “Translation is re-telling, as exactly as possible, the meaning of the original message in a way that is natural in the language into which the translation is being made.” By this definition, translation means to tell again what is told in another language exactly in the other language that the translation is being done without altering the meaning of the words.

All languages are different. Each language has its own grammar, its own words and expressions. In order to express the meaning of the message he is translating, the translator often has to use grammatical forms and words that are different from those of the language he is translating from. That does not matter. The important thing is that the meaning of the message is unchanged. The work of a translator is to translate the meaning of the message, rather than the words. For a translator to achieve a good quality translation.

## **TWO KINDS OF TRANSLATION**

There are two kinds of translations that are discussed in this paper, which are:

## ‘Literal’ and ‘Meaning-based’ Translations

**A LITERAL** translation is a kind of translation whereby the translation follows as closely as possible the form of the language which is used in the original message.

**A MEANING-BASED** translation is that kind of translation that aims to express the exact meaning of the original message in a way that is natural in the new language.

A meaning-based translation may:

1. Change the order of the words; it will use the order which is most clear and natural in the language into which the translation is being made;
2. Change the expressions or idioms; it will use the words which give the meaning of the original clearly, even though this may not be the same idiom as in the original message.”

A meaning-based translation is sometimes also called:

1. **Meaning-equivalent:** It communicates the same meaning as the original message.
2. **Idiomatic:** It uses the natural, idiomatic form of the language into which the translation is being made.
3. **Dynamic:** It aims to produce the same impact on the hearers as the original message had on the original hearers or readers. It aims to stir the reader to action as the original version.

## **QUALITIES OF A GOOD TRANSLATION:**

To achieve a good quality translation, the following procedures should be applied for each section translated

A good translation should be:

**ACCURATE:** The translator must re-express the meaning of the original message as exactly as possible in the language into which he is translating.

**CLEAR:** The translation should be clear and understandable.

**NATURAL:** A translation should not sound ‘foreign’. It should not sound like a translation at all, but like someone speaking in the natural, everyday way.

The translator aims to communicate the message in a way that people can readily understand. In understanding about clarity in translation, Richard C. Blight in translation problems observes that “the quality of a translation is to plainly communicate the same message that the source text communicated to its original readers. The message needs to be in a form that can be easily understood by its readers”. Thus the three most important qualities of a good translations that a translator must bear in mind are:

- ACCURACY
- CLARITY
- NATURALNESS

This means when judging whether a translation is good or bad, the translator must ask himself/herself these three questions:

1. Is the translation **ACCURATE**?

Does it communicate the exact meaning of the original message? Has the meaning been changed in any way?

Notice that an **accurate** translation is not one that is as near to the form of the original message as possible, but one that expresses the same meaning as exactly as possible.

A translation is **inaccurate** if the meaning of the translation is different in any way from the original message. Kathy Barnwell observed inaccuracy in translation to include:

**Omission:** The translation is inaccurate if part of the meaning is missing.

**Addition:** The translation is inaccurate if anything has been added to the meaning.

**Change:** The translation is inaccurate if the meaning has been changed or twisted in any way.

For an accurate translation, the translator must also have it in mind to ask if the translation is accurate in the sense that if the meaning is as nearly as possible the same meaning that the original author intended to be. So when translating, the translator is not to omit, add, or change the meaning of the original message.

2. Is the translation **CLEAR**?

For a translator to understand that the translation is **clear**, he must bear in mind the following questions as also observed by Barnwell:

“Does the translation communicate the meaning? Do people understand what the translation means? Is what they understand in fact the original meaning that the author intended?”

For the translator, the important thing is that there is nothing in the wording of the translation that makes the message difficult to understand. The kind of language used should be that which makes the message as clear as possible.

3. Is the translation **NATURAL**?

For a **natural** translation, the translator must have it in mind whether this is the kind of language the people you are translating to use. And if it is lively and interesting in their language or even “sweet” to their hearing.

Is it natural? He can ask himself/herself if this is the way the people speak their language. Is this the way that people speak?

Because if a translator is not very careful, he or she will often carry over expressions from the language he/she are translating from. Careful checking and testing is needed to find the natural, idiomatic expression in the language. In any language, there may be more than one way of expressing the same idea. One way may be easier to understand than another way. It is your aim as a translator to express the meaning in the way that is clearest, so that it communicates the message effectively.

If a good translation is ACCURATE, CLEAR, and NATURAL, then what are the signs of a bad translation? A good translation communicates the right meaning well.

A bad translation may:

- a. communicate the right meaning badly (unclear, unnatural);
- b. communicate the wrong meaning badly (inaccurate, unclear, unnatural);
- c. communicate the wrong meaning well (inaccurate, but clear and natural). This is the most dangerous kind of translation of all!

### **SOMETRANSLATION TERMS**

For translation to be qualitative, there are some terms a translator must always remember when translating. These terms are:

**SOURCE LANGUAGE:** The source language is the language from which a translation is being made. If a person is translating from English into Hausa, then the Source Language is English.”

**RECEPTOR LANGUAGE:** The Receptor Language is the language into which a translation is being made. If a person is translating from English into Hausa, then the Receptor Language is Hausa.

If a person is translating from Greek into English, which language is the Source Language? Greek is the Source language.

Therefore the terms Source Language and Receptor Language are often shortened to SL and RL.

Another word which is sometimes used instead of Receptor Language is Target Language. Receptor Language and Target Language mean exactly the same.

### **TWO STEPS IN TRANSLATING**

As a translator, your aim is to communicate the meaning of the source text that is the language from which you are translating from. The grammar and expressions of each language are different, so you cannot just translate the Source Language words, one by one. You have to think of the meaning of the message you are translating.

Translation can be diagrammed like this:

Barnwell suggested two steps in translating as follows:

STEP 1: Study the source text and discover the meaning that is expressed by the words and grammatical patterns of the Source Language.

STEP 2: Re-express that meaning using different words and grammatical patterns. The meaning should be expressed in a way that is clear and natural in the Receptor Language.

Even though the form will be different, but the meaning must be the same.

Never leave out STEP 1! A translator must never translate before studying the meaning. If that is done, the result will always be a bad translation. “Studying the source text and discovering the exact meaning is the first step.”

When the meaning of the passage is clear in your mind, you are ready to re-express that meaning in a clear and natural way in the Receptor Language.

Therefore the most important things a translator must REMEMBER are:

1. When preparing to translate, the first step is always to study the meaning of the source text.
2. When the meaning of the source text is clear in your mind, the second step is to re-express that meaning clearly in a way that is natural in the Receptor Language.

“Here it is not the shape of the anchor that is important but what it was used for.”

Some steps that a translator must also remember when translating are seen on the following steps:

Step 1 is always ‘**discover the meaning**’. As you cannot translate until you are sure that you yourself know the meaning of the original word or phrase accurately.

Use a DICTIONARY or other aids in order to be sure of the exact meaning of the original idea.

Step 2 is ‘**re-express the meaning**’. There are at least three possible ways in which unknown ideas can be translated. Consider each case separately to find the solution which fits that particular idea and context best.”

Three possible solutions are:

1. Use a descriptive phrase.
2. Substitute something similar that is known to the Receptor Language speakers.
3. Use a foreign word from another language.

1. **Use a descriptive phrase**

Instead of a single word, it may be necessary to use a phrase to describe the thing that is being talked about.

EXAMPLES: (The symbol ---> means “can be re-expressed as”.)

- a. pen ---> “a thing for writing with”
- b. watch ---> “a thing for measuring how the sun goes”
- c. aero plane ---> “a canoe which travels in the sky”
- d. Matthew 5:23 altar ---> “place/table where people sacrifice to God”
- e. Matthew 13:33 leaven/yeast ---> “thing which makes bread well”
- f. John 20:15 gardener ---> “person who looks after the farm”

“One disadvantage of this solution is that it can sometimes give a long and rather clumsy translation. The translator must be careful to fit the descriptive phrase neatly into the passage so that it does not upset the balance of the message or draw attention away from the main theme.”

If the word is mentioned several times in a passage, it may not be necessary to use the full descriptive phrase each time it is mentioned. For example, “synagogue” might be translated “the house where the Jews met to worship God” in the first occurrence, and then, when mentioned again later in the passage, be referred to simply as “that meeting house”.

## 2. **Substitute something similar**

Sometimes the exact thing referred to in the text may be unknown to the people of the Receptor Language area, but there may be something similar that is known that can be used instead.

Again, it is essential to consider the context carefully and to make sure that the idea which is important in the context has been communicated. Here is an example given in 1 Peter 5:8.

“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.”

In this passage, the important idea is that the lion is a dangerous animal that prowls around looking for an animal to pounce on and eat. In an area where lions are unknown, but where leopards are found, the word “leopard” could be used instead of “lion”. A leopard, like a lion, is a fierce beast which attacks and eats other animals. To substitute leopard for lion in the passage does not change the message.

In deciding whether or not it is possible to substitute something from the Receptor Language culture, take the following points into account:

“Choose something that is as similar in form as possible to the original idea, provided that it also communicates the idea that is important for the context. For example, in 1 Peter 5:8, “leopard” is a good substitute for “lion” because it is a dangerous animal that preys on other animals and it is also an animal that is fairly similar to a lion. It would not be as good to substitute something like “hawk” because, although a hawk also preys on animals, it is very different from a lion in form.”

### **3. Use a foreign word from another language**

A foreign word is a word taken from another language. Foreign words are words that are not usually used by speakers of the language.

A foreign word is different from an adopted word.

What is an adopted word? “An adopted word is a word originally taken from another language that has become a part of the language”. All languages adopt words from other languages in this way. Usually they take them from major languages that are spoken in the area, to refer to ideas that have recently become known. For example, English has taken many words from Latin, Greek, and French.

“Words are adopted over a period of time. Gradually the word is used so much that everybody comes to know its meaning. Everybody uses it, even those people who do not know the language that it comes from. It is pronounced just like other words in the language. Words that have been adopted into a language in this way are no longer foreign words.”

Adopted words are also sometimes called ‘borrowed words’ or ‘loan words’.

The disadvantage of using foreign words in a translation is that many ordinary people do not know what the words mean. The words are unfamiliar to them, and so they mean nothing. The use of foreign words should, therefore, be avoided in translation as much as possible. Use the foreign word together with a more general word that tells the reader what kind of thing the foreign word is.

Examples of some possible translations are as follows:

Mark 1:6 a garment made with the hair of an animal called “camel”

In this example, the more general word “animal” provides the information that a camel is a kind of animal.

### **HOW TO TRANSLATE UNKNOWN IDEAS**

Whenever you as a translator is translating an unknown idea, there are two other possible methods you are to follow as such:

#### **4. Use a word that is more general in meaning**

What is meant by a word that is more general than another word?

Here are some examples:

Compare the two words “cat” and “animal”. A cat is one kind of animal; there are also other kinds of animal, like “dog” and “horse”. So the word “animal” is more general than the word “cat”, because it includes other kinds of animals besides cats.

## **TRANSLATING UNKNOWN NAMES**

Names that unfamiliar to the speakers of the Receptor Language may cause difficulties for several reasons:

1. The name may be hard to pronounce. It is usual that proper names (that is, names of people or places) are adapted to a form which is easy to pronounce in the Receptor Language. They are re-spelt according to the spelling system of the language.
2. People will not know to what they refer. For example, a name might refer to a region or a town, or a river or a mountain. In some contexts it is might even not be clear whether a place or a person is referred to.

Therefore, wherever necessary, the translator should provide any information that the hearer needs in order to understand the passage correctly. This is usually done by including a general word which indicates the kind of place referred to.

The translator should be careful to check all unfamiliar place names on a map to make sure that he himself knows what is referred to. A translator should, if at all possible, be able to give all his working time to the translation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper highlighted some qualities that a translation must have, if it is to be marketable. It must be accurate, clear, and natural. If such qualification is available in any material that is being translated, people would like to buy the materials, and it will boost Government revenue.

## REFERENCES

- Beekman, J. and Callow, J. C. (1974). *Translating the Word of God*. Zondervan.
- Eugene, B. and Rob, K. (2015). *Training Papers For Bible Translation*. TCNN Jos.
- Katy, B. (2012). *An Introductory Course For Mother-Tongue Translators*. Nigerian Bible translation Trust, Jos.
- Larson, M.L. (1984). *Meaning-based Translation, a Guide to Cross-language Equivalence*. University Press of America, Inc.,
- Nida, E.A. and Taber, C.R. (1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. United Bible Societies.
- Thomson, G. (1980). "Translation Quality and Exegetical Ability." *unpublished manuscript*.
- Richard C. Blight, *Translation Principles*.
- Wonderly, W. L. (1968). *Bible Translations for Popular Use*. United Bible Societies.