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WHAT IS TRANSLATION

Larry K. Browning

My attempt here is to collect and try to organize factors which need to be faced as a first step in defining what translation may or may not be. I realized early that I could not give the answers, so decided to bring to you the problems and possibilities which would probably need to be considered in coming to any kind of agreement.

The question is a complex one. Imagine the following situations.

- (a) A translator is given material and told, "We want you to translate this." Do both know what the other means by this? From my experience if this happened to me, my first reaction would be to ask, "How do you want me to translate it? I can transform it into my language on several different levels, for various types of audiences, faithfully or freely. What do you mean by 'translate' it?"
- (b) Someone announces: "We are engaged in translation work." or "I am a translator." But what does he mean?
- (c) A reader, or reviewer, or supervisor says, "This is a good (or, poor) translation." What does he mean? In what way is he evaluating it?

From one point of view, the range of kinds of translation runs from "word-for-word," to what is generally considered "literal" or "faithful", then to what some wish for, called "equivalent", and on to differing degrees of "free" translation. A next level might be "re-authoring." The extremes are not usually what are referred to when we talk about translation. But there is still a large range of interpretations in between.

Following are some of the questions I feel must be faced.

- (1) How might meaning be altered if translation is not strictly formal, that is, closely reflecting the original? Changing meaning should be a serious consideration in much of Church translation. What should be considered a mistake? How can we evaluate translation?
- (2) How do people really react to different kinds of translations? That is, do we need to try for

literary excellence in order to be read? What is readability?

- (3) What is the relationship of the formal content, as the material is written, and the "overall" or "total" meaning, or implied meaning? That is, is there more in a piece of writing than is in the total structure? If so, can translators from other cultures be expected to capture nuances? How would a team effort help? Would team work be worth the cost?
- (4) What should be done if material for translation is not written well? Could it be translated as is and require the original author to take some responsibility?
- (5) What if the material is ambiguous, or unclear? Should the translator guess? If no, what can he do? If so, he may be wrong. Even if he is correct, what are the implications of the foreign language audience then getting material in better condition than the original audience?
- (6) What is poor translation? An oft repeated criticism of translation is that it is non-standard. What is meant by this? Is there a standard? Can we judge more than formal accuracy. Probably no English speaker would say things as Truman Madsen, or Neil Maxwell do. Should we dismiss them as non-standard speakers because they don't say things as another native might? I have heard Taiwan translators judge something as poor because it came from Hong Kong and therefore influenced by a non-standard dialect, Cantonese. But, those judged neither know Cantonese, nor are they aware that the translators they are judging are native Mandarin speakers, who cannot even speak Cantonese. I have heard European translators in Salt Lake judged as poor because they are out of touch with the language back home. How valid or serious is this? I have heard the criticism of work as being non-native missionary-ese, when, the extent of the non-native's involvement has only been to coordinate the schedules of natives doing the work. We put up with foreigners using our language in "non-standard" ways, or our children as they are learning it. Can the Church not be expected to do the same for the translated words of its leaders?
- (7) Is there such a thing as "equivalent" translation? Equivalent in what way? Formally equivalent or producing equivalent impact? But we often say that

cultures are different; and the reason we need to translate is because languages are different. Then how can different be made equivalent? Another question about equivalence: "Equivalent for whom?" Do all source language readers agree about the original and will the target audience uniformly agree? If we insist on equivalent reaction to material, wouldn't we need to make different "translations" for audiences in sub-cultures of the original language, because they may all react differently to the material based on their Highland Scottish or New Zealand environments?

- (8) Where does translation cease and free authoring begin? What if a translated piece does not really fit in the literary tradition of the target cultures? Can translation stand as a class of writing on its own? The Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price are the only models of translation with any indication of the Lord's seal. Are they perfect in literary excellence in English? Doesn't the fact that we know they are translated help make them acceptable in spite of technical problems? Aren't they accepted as a separate kind of writing?
- (9) What is really the place of transculturation in translation? If we change something to become closer to the target culture, are we really translating the original? Do we need to always adjust material, or can other people be expected to broaden themselves by learning of the culture of the original, much as we need to do when reading the Bible or Book of Mormon? I will take the bold step of even asking: What is wrong with Wasatch Front culture, as long as we don't preach that others need to copy it? If there is found the necessity to explain more than there is in the original or explain something about the original, can't we consider this a job separate from the translation process, and supplement it with notes, or even reference books as we have for the English scriptures?
- (10) What kind of factors would affect a decision regarding the approach necessary for a particular piece of writing? Can we delineate different types of material, different purposes, different kinds of audiences? Who should make these decisions, the translator or the administrator?

I don't know what can be done to attempt to resolve these questions. But I feel strongly that we cannot depend much on outside experts. Articles and books have been written by many people, but they are engaged mostly in a parti-

cular kind of translation. As a result they can speak quite authoritatively about Bible translation for different kinds of audiences, or about translation of creative literature, or about scientific technical material translation. But our translation work has elements of all these, and other factors as well. So we can't be swayed by any particular argument.

What I advocate is a rational study of all these questions, and not all-or-nothing, dogmatic judgments closing off consideration of other ideas and possible improvements.