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The American Sign Language Translation of the Book of Mormon

Linguistic and Cultural Considerations

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“For the first 20 years after its publication in 1830, the Book of Mormon was printed only in English. During the next 127 years (1851-1978), thirty-one translations were done. That number has more than doubled in the past 11 years, with either all or part of the Book of Mormon being translated into 64 new languages...” (Ensign, 1991, p. 75). Truly Doctrines and Covenants 90:11 “...every man shall hear the fullness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language...” is in the process of being fulfilled! Each translation into a different language involves more than just knowing the linguistic dictations of that language; culture must also be taken into account. As any linguist will assent, language and culture is firmly bound to each other. Each translation of the Book of Mormon thus needs to take into account both the cultural and linguistic influences of the target language. This is no different with ASL (American Sign Language), the target language of this translation project.

ASL is the language used by a majority of Deaf people living in America and Canada. (The word Deaf, as opposed to deaf, specifies the cultural bonding many Deaf people have with each other, having grown up without much of their hearing ability. People who lose hearing in their later years often don't feel this cultural bond to other Deaf people.) By the very virtue of not having had our hearing ability for most of our lives, Deaf people have become much more dependent on visual stimuli. What we see is what we know. Therefore, over the years (about two centuries) Deaf people have incorporated how we see the world into our language, and, in that way, ASL uses space, speed, eye movements, facial expressions, and most importantly, hands to convey exactly how we perceive the world. To us, this is culturally comfortable and

linguistically sound. On the other hand, English, having been developed over the centuries according to how English-speaking people have wanted it to sound, is just that much more “foreign” to us.

ASL is as complex and intricate and profound as any other language, and as difficult to learn. Many people trying to learn the language in their later years have difficulty grasping the nuances of the language, the use of space and facial expressions. The three-dimensional aspect of ASL can be an impediment towards developing native-like competence; it is just a little too “strange”—just like trying to learn and understand the tonal characteristic of Chinese can be for learners of that language.

Many people don't realize how different ASL is from English. They wonder why it is so difficult to translate from English to ASL, wondering why the words couldn't be signed off the English page. There are several answers to this type of question. First, the main idea of the First Presidency's *Official Statement* about translating the standard works is: “translations of the Standard Works from English into any language are to be *literal* translations insofar as possible” (emphasis added). This statement basically states two points: First, we can't attempt to *interpret*, but rather we must concentrate on translating as literally as possible the sayings in the Book of Mormon.

In the examples given here and elsewhere, the English version is typed below with the ASL translation given above. It must be understood that the ASL translations has not been approved as of yet by the Translation Department of the Church, but are shown here as the best translation possible at the moment. The various symbols are used for facial expressions, repetition, speed, emphasis, and the such. Words in parentheses likewise indicate what

paralinguistical expression is necessary. An example will illustrate the point that we must concentrate on translating as literally as possible:

Mosiah 3:26

That reason //cup (CL:cup) God Thy (2h)anger (CL:fill-cup)\<they finish drink...

Therefore, they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God...

Note that the ASL translation of this verse makes no attempt to explain that the verse means that “they” have *experienced* God’s wrath. The concept was translated as literally as possible. Readers of the ASL translation of this verse will need to analyze it as much as an English reader will the English verse to come to the real meaning of the verse.

The second point to realize about a literal translation is that care must be taken to assure that phrases that are repeated in the book are translated in the same way throughout. As with other languages, there can be several correct possible ways to translate any given phrase into ASL. If we had signers sign “off the English page,” these phrases can very easily be translated differently each time they come up.

These two items of concern are a challenge; however, a third and much more demanding cause of the difficulty in translating from English to ASL is the many differences between the two languages, with both cultural values and linguistic differences playing a role. ASL has a few special characteristics that many other languages don’t possess: it is signed and not spoken with the voice, it is not written, and it is relatively unexplored. (Research on the language itself started in the early 1960’s, a mere thirty years ago.) The remainder of this paper will examine examples to illustrate how problem areas have been resolved.

SPACE AND CLASSIFIERS

Like mentioned above, ASL uses space to convey information. One way this is done is by using *classifiers*, which basically means signs that describe shape, size, location and movement. These classifiers are used in the space in front of the body to show how physical items are set up in relation to

each other. For example, when we want to describe a room, we use classifiers to tell where certain objects are: to our left, in front of us, between two aforementioned items, above another object, and the such. Trying to translate Lehi’s dream, and the wars in Alma, and, yet, retaining the integrity of the English verse (in other words, remaining literal) was a tremendous challenge!

1 Nephi 8:26

...//water (CL-river)\& other >over-there there large building huge(cha) (CL-large building)(sh) -- and //(CL-large building)(sh)\& seem (2h)up //earth (CL-ground)\& (CL-high-above), (CL-large building)(sh).

...on the other side of the river of water, a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth.

SUMMONING SOMEONE

In the Deaf culture, we don’t get each other’s attention by calling out a person’s name. We wave, or ask people close to the person to get their attention for us. When the below verse was confronted, it took a little “putting on of the English culture” to realize how it should be translated.

Joseph Smith History 1:33

//My name\& <he speak (CL-get attention), and told-me <himself messenger...

He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger...

CHRONOLOGY

In ASL, sentences are spoken in a chronological time frame. It is difficult to try to say something in ASL without first explaining and/or discussing what happened before that event occurred. We need to “see” the situation and see how an occurrence affects the other in a chronological sequence of events.

1 Nephi 3:1

And happen //NEPHI\& that me, me finish (2h)speak Thee Lord, me #BACK my father’s tent.

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, returned from speaking with the Lord, to the tent of my father.

In a similar manner, parenthetical expressions are difficult to translate. Most often than not, the information in parentheses are “out of time frame,” yet to preserve the integrity of the English version, the ASL translation needs to, somehow, keep the concept of the writer of that verse having stopped in the middle of a thought to discuss/explain something else.

Mormon 1:5

And //MORMON\ that me, myself //NEPHI\ generation me, (small-SH-R) and //my father's name\ MORMON (SH-C) anyway //five-list AMMARON order-me\ me remember-twist.

And I, Mormon, being a descendant of Nephi, (and my father's name was Mormon) I remembered the things which Ammaron commanded me.

PASSIVE SENTENCES

ASL doesn't have passive sentences. Many passive sentences encountered are easy to rewrite into active sentences.

Omni 1:21 (simple passive)

... and ZARAHEMPLA his people class ago find CORIANTUMR --

...And Coriantumr was discovered by the people of Zarahemla...

However, some sentences pose more difficulty.

1 Nephi 4:16 (passive sentence without agent)

And me y-same know //law it\ finish engrave there plates BRASS

And I also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass.

1 Nephi 1:1 (passive sentence with need for topicalization—this example actually has two passive concepts, one after the other)

//NEPHI\ that me, my parents born me, //them-two righteous exalted\ that reason (sm sh-r) //my father his learn know open-things\ (sm sh-c) “well”(nod-mm) finish teach-me

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father...

NEGATIVE

While ASL does have negative sentences in that one using the language can say that he doesn't have something, or that he did not do something, ASL does not have rhetorical negative statements or questions, nor does the language have the neither-nor concept.

Omni 1:6

...true, he won't let fail that words five-list Thee (2h)speak our father-ancient...

...yea, he would not suffer that the words should not be verified, which he spake unto our fathers...

Moroni 10:4

...me want urge++, you ask(up) God, Thyself (2h)Father Eternal, with name Christ, ask(up) “?” five-list true...

...I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true...

Alma 5:11

...//ABINADI >his mouth (2h)speak words five-list\ “?” //right\ my father, that ALMA, <he believe and “?” //right\ >himself prophet holy “?” //right\ >himself finish (2h)speak God Thy word+ and //my father, that ALMA\ <he believe.

...did not my father Alma believe in the words which were delivered by the mouth of Abinadi? And was he not a holy prophet? Did he not speak the words of God, and my father Alma believe them?

Mosiah 2:13

Y-same me late(th) allow you-all fist-put++ jail, or you-all slave each other or you-all murder or (2h)(alt)capture or steal or adultery++, me late(th) allow...

Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery...

OTHER

The above discussion should help it be more apparent why it is difficult to translate verses like the ones found in Ether 1:6-32. These verses aren't chronological, nor are they active in the sense that the subject does the action.

Ether 1:7-9

7) //CORIANTOR\\, //his father\\, MORON.

8) And //MORON\\, //his father\\, ETHEM.

9) And //ETHER\\, //his father\\, AHAH.

7 Coriantor was the son of Moron.

8 And Moron was the son of Ethem.

9 And Ethem was the son of Ahah.

These are but a few examples that can be discussed; they will suffice to show there are many differences between English and ASL, and that both linguistic and cultural considerations need to be made while translating.

Isaiah 29:18 says: "And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness." Each scripture has a spiritual and a temporal interpretation, and we believe that the blind are already "seeing out of obscurity" with the Braille Book of Mormon, and that the deaf will soon get their chance to "hear the words of the book" with this ASL translation project. And we rejoice in it!

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Born and raised in Idaho into a Deaf family which consisted of Deaf parents and eight Deaf siblings. Received my BA in English from Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C.. Afterwards, worked three years as Coordinator of the Learning Center at SouthWest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf in Texas. Currently in the middle of my masters study in Teaching English as a Second Language at BYU, teaching Deaf Culture at BYU, and translating the Book of Mormon. Married 2 years to the most wonderful man.