

TRANSLATION SHIFTS AND THE IMPROVEMENT OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS: THE CASE OF RUTH 4:13 IN THE SETSWANA VERSIONS

Sidney Berman

Department of Theology and Religious Studies
North West University, Mafikeng Campus

Private Bag X2046, Mmabatho

South Africa, 2735

E-mail: sidneybrmn@yahoo.co.uk

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the starting point for the improvement of Bible translations in sub-Saharan Africa is the identification and analysis of translation shifts. Shifts are differences between the corresponding portions of a translation and the source text. The concept of shifts is motivated by the observation that differences between a Bible translation and its source text are inevitable. This article demonstrates that the demarcation and examination of a shift can greatly enlighten the hypothesis of circumstances that caused the shift. Consequently, the translator or reviewer can be alert to the influence of similar circumstances contemporarily and find possible ways to eliminate or modify the shift. The article uses the text of Ruth 4:13 from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The three Setswana Bibles that are compared with *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* are the translations by Robert Moffat (1857), Alfred Wookey (1908) and Bible Society of South Africa (1970). After examination and comparison, the article hypothesizes on the circumstances that may have caused the shifts of Ruth 4:13. It ends with suggestions for translating the verse without causing shifts.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that translations tend to fall short of accurately interpreting their source texts, hence the dictum *traduttore traditore*, which means that the translator is a traitor. In the field of Bible translation in particular, vernacular Bibles in sub-Saharan Africa have immediately needed review and correction as soon as they were published.¹ Still, there seems to be no consensus on the starting point for

¹ For example, contentions arose concerning how names of African divinities were used as well as the use of loanwords from European languages. (See Dube 1999:33–59; Makutoane and Naude 2009:79–94; Togarasei 2009:52–64).

correcting the errors of the Bible translator and, specifically, improving Bible versions in sub-Saharan African languages. That is probably because analysts of translations tend to treat as a starting point the circumstances that led to the occurrence of shifts. For example, as commonly observed by critics of Bible translations, contentious issues may emanate from postcolonial elements, gender imbalances,² incompetence of translators, incompatibilities between languages and/or cultures, and other issues.

This article proposes a systematic starting point for the improvement of Bible translations, namely the identification and analysis of translation shifts. That entails the identification, demarcation and examination of corresponding portions of the two texts to discover the differences they demonstrate with reference to each other. After examination of a particular shift, the analyst can hypothesize with greater certainty on circumstances that led to the shift, whether they relate to exegetical shortcomings, postcolonial biases, gender imbalance, cultural and linguistic incompatibilities, organisational expectations and source text problems, among others. This method enables the translator to discover what created the shift and thereby equips him/her to correct it.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CONCEPT OF SHIFTS

The analysis of translation shifts attempts to identify the differences between the source text and target text, to postulate the origins of the differences and find reasons for their existence. Catford, the pioneer of the term “translation shifts” for such differences, regarded the differences as “departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the source language to the target language” (Catford 1965:73). However, my study takes Toury’s more advanced perspective, which views shifts

² Post-colonial criticism investigates relationships of inequality and domination/suppression in their connection with the continued effects of colonialism. In the case of translation, post-colonialists argue that European translators suppressed target languages and cultures (see Bassnett and Trivedi 1999:3–4). The analyst would argue that the target text shifted from the source in order to serve colonial interests. Gender imbalances are inequalities that favour or empower one gender over another. Gender critics often argue that translations disempower women.

from both a formal and functional perspective (Toury 1995:85). In this study's model, the term "formal" refers to correspondence or equivalence at the level of forms, that is, *semes*, lexical items, sentences and larger units. "Functional correspondence", however, gives priority to the interpretation or communicative function/purpose of the unit in mention. A formal shift, therefore, refers to lack of correspondence in form while a functional shift refers to lack of correspondence in function.³ A formal shift may occur where the target text unit has a different meaning because of the wrong choice of lexical item(s). A functional shift occurs when a form could be a correct, formal correspondent of the source text, but fails to capture the functional meaning of the source text unit. A translation could, of course, also be both formally and functionally wrong or correct. An example of a correct formal correspondent which is also functionally wrong may be found in the literal rendering in Ruth 1:17 of יַעֲשֶׂה לִּי יְהוָה לִּי וְכֹה יִסִּיף כִּי הַמָּוֶת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ by one of the Setswana Bibles. An unarranged word for word transliteration of the Hebrew text is "He did Yahweh to me and so (now) may he do again/increase if the death he/it separates between me and between you". The Setswana Bible sticks closely to these Hebrew forms and comes up with, "May Yahweh do for me, and so may he do again if death separates me and you." Yet, the source text refers idiomatically to "May Yahweh strike me dead" (Conklin 2011:23).

Toury advocates that all the formal and functional (including the intermediate) relationships of a pair should be displayed so as to identify the overall semantic network of the pair (Toury 1995:85). Some shifts will be formal, others both formal and functional, while others will be only functional. In this way, more than one type of relationship in the pair could be identified, described and evaluated. The evaluation would be in terms of interpretative accuracy and the target audience's likely interpretation of the translated text. The concept of translation shifts enables the translation analyst to better specify, evaluate and explain the differences between the source text and target text. These shifts occur because of the differing frames of reference of the two texts' communication contexts (both linguistic and extra-

³ See Nida and Taber (1974:1–2 and 56) for the concepts of "function" and "form".

linguistic). Some shifts can be considered as justifiable and/or unavoidable while others may be considered unjustifiable and/or avoidable.

CAUSES OF SHIFTS

The notion of “translation problems” (as developed by Nord) can be used to explain why shifts occur (Nord 2005:166). A translation problem is an objective task that all the translators who are involved in a given project have to overcome during the translation process.

Nord classifies translation problems into four categories, namely: 1) Pragmatic translation problems, which pertain to the contrasts between situations under which the source text was produced or used, and for which the target text is produced; 2) convention-related translation problems, resulting from differences in behavioural conventions between the source and target cultures; 3) linguistic translation problems, which arise from structural differences between the source and target languages and 4) text-specific translation problems, which are difficulties that are unique to the particular text (Nord 2005:167). These translation problems can be used within the contextual frames of reference model to categorise and explain the specific problems that could have led to the shifts that manifested in a given translation. The enumerated translation problems match respectively the following four categories of heuristic Bible translation contexts: (1) organisational; (2) sociocultural; (3) communication-situation; (4) textual contexts. Wilt and Wendland refer to these contexts as contextual frames of reference (Wilt and Wendland 2008).

Contextual frames of reference are cognitive factors that influence translators to produce certain renderings for the target text during translation. They often constrain or influence translators during decision making, which results in differences between the source text and the target text. These organisational, sociocultural, communication and textual influences sometimes overlap due to the fluid and fuzzy nature of their boundaries (Wilt 2003a:43–44). For example, in analysing a translation, sometimes a word choice may appear to have been influenced by both a lexical frame and a communication frame. Yet more often than not, the different frames are easy to

demarcate. Moreover, it will often be found that the two (or more) possibilities do not contradict each other. Categorising the frames enables a more precise discernment of errors, problem points and their causes as well as the means of preventing or solving them.

The concept of frames presents a multifaceted tool for investigating factors that determine a translator's choice among different possibilities of rendering. The frames are cognitive because they are influential contexts of the mind (Wendland 2008:19). Thus, they may also be described as psychological, conceptual or mental in nature. Whilst four heuristic categories of contextual frames of reference have been identified, they have numerous sub-categories. These sub-categories could involve influences of a lexical, syntactical or exegetical nature, technical and culture specific expressions, unrecognisable euphemisms, metaphors, denominational ideologies, other influential Bible versions, socio-cultural influences, manuscript problems, methodological preferences, irresolvable linguistic differences and many more.

PROCEDURE FOR FINDING SHIFTS

The process of finding translation shifts starts by treating the source text and target text as sets of linguistic structures and examining where the structures are different (Pym 2010:66).⁴ The analyst reads and interprets each verse sequentially in the source text and then its intended target text correspondent. The analyst pauses reading and demarcates the beginning or end of a unit at points: 1) where the target text manifests a form that differs with the Hebrew lexical form, 2) where it chooses a different syntactical construction from the original, 3) where the target text manifests clumsy communication, and 4) where it represents a different meaning from the source text meaning. The units are segmented at the level of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs, depending on the domain of a shift. The unit sizes vary because the domains of different shifts differ, variably covering a lexical item, phrase, clause,

⁴ The exposition of translation shifts in this paragraph is adapted from Pym's (2010:66) comprehensive summary of the concept, except where another source is indicated.

sentence or paragraph.

The analyst labels the shifts as either formal or functional. Such labels or categories may in turn be used further to explore postulations and propositions of how the rendering could have arisen. They are likely to indicate “translation decisions and the constraints [and contexts] under which they were made” (Toury 1995:88–89). Thus, the identification of translation shifts is not an end in itself. It is a means towards hypothesising with regard to the contextual and cognitive influences on the translator(s) that resulted in differences between the source text and the target text. An awareness of such influential circumstances will contribute towards an avoidance of the same translation choices if deemed inappropriate in a new translation or revision.

THE ANALYSIS OF SHIFTS

The analysis of translation shifts can be carried out either bottom-up or top-down. A bottom-up analysis starts with smaller units, namely words, phrases, clauses, sentences or more, and progresses to larger ones such as text, context, genre or culture (Pym 2010:68–69). Scholars that use bottom-up analysis are often judged to be oriented towards the equivalence paradigm, while those interested in top-down analysis are usually thought to be oriented towards the descriptive paradigm (Pym 2010:68). The equivalence approach, as commonly observed in Bible translation, tends to prioritise the communication of minute details, so its analysis starts from the bottom; the descriptive paradigm is inclined towards more general descriptions, hence its analysis starts from the top (Pym 2010:68). The field of Bible translation exhibits a greater interest in a detailed interpretation and rendering of the original texts and tends to use bottom-up analysis.

As an example of a bottom-up analysis of a shift, let us consider the example, “Pull the handle in case of danger. Penalties for improper use” as a translation of the Italian warning “Tirare la maniglia solo in caso de pericolo. Ogni abuso verra punito”.⁵ The Italian warning is meant to communicate that the user should pull the

⁵ This example is adapted from Toury (1995:95).

handle to stop the train only in case of emergency; furthermore, there would be penalties for improper use. The analyst could break down the texts into smaller segments so as to create the following pairs, for example:

“solo in caso” – “in case of,” and

“di pericolo” – “danger”

The analyst would find that “solo” (only) has not been accounted for (or translated), so a shift has resulted. In addition, the analyst would observe that “di pericolo” should have been interpreted as “emergency” rather than “danger”. The analyst would then go further and hypothesize concerning the difference in overall interpretation between the two texts and investigate the different contexts that may have given rise to the identified shifts.

A top-down analysis, however, begins with “larger systemic factors (especially constructs such as the position of translations within a socio-cultural system) and works down to the smaller ones” (Pym 2010:66). As a random example, in analysing the translation of Psalm 1 (using a didactic “Wisdom” setting), the analyst may start by considering the use of Psalm 137 (which is a hymn/song) in the source text culture and compare the poetic effect of the Hebrew original with those of the target text (e.g., genre type, layout, etc.). Last in order and priority would be the analysis of smaller units of the psalm. This process is more inclined towards a descriptive than an equivalence approach to the analysis of translations.

AN ILLUSTRATION USING SETSWANA BIBLE VERSIONS: THE CASE OF RUTH 4:13

Hebrew text (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*)

וַיָּבֵא אֱלֹהִים וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה לָּהּ הַרְיוֹן וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן

A word for word match of this text which has not been rearranged is: “And he went in/ to her/ and he gave/ Yahweh/ to her/ conception/ and she gave birth/ a son”.

In a more comprehensible English construction, this unit corresponds formally to “and he went in to her, and Yahweh gave her conception, and she gave birth to a son”. It refers to “He had sex with her and Yahweh gave her conception; then she gave birth

to a son”. To “go in” is a Hebrew euphemism for sex (Block 1999:91; de Waard and Nida 1991:58). The Setswana concepts of conception and giving birth are normally expressed euphemistically. To communicate without awkwardness or distraction, a Setswana translation will probably need to find euphemisms for “have sex”, “conceive” and “give birth”.

Moffat

A tse na mo go ene; mme Jehova a mo naya ithwalo; mme a tsala mosimane

(He entered into her; and Yahweh gave her pregnancy; and she gave birth to a boy)

This Bible was published in 1857 by the British Foreign Bible Society, having been translated by Robert Moffat. He was a missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS) who worked among the Batlhaping and surrounding Tswana tribes (Jones 1975:1). From all observation, the Moffat Bible was translated strictly word for word from the King James Bible (Berman 2014:110). This practice has had two effects on Moffat’s translation. First, he allowed the KJV to do his interpretation for him, and no interpretation (and/or misinterpretation) of the original biblical languages can be genuinely ascribed to him. Secondly, his Setswana expressions and vocabulary are based on forms of expression of the KJV. Consequently, the Moffat Bible, unlike Wookey and BSSA, exhibits instances of incorrect use of Setswana, which can be ascribed both to the effects of the KJV and to his imperfect knowledge of Setswana. An example of incorrect use is Moffat’s rendering, in Ruth 1:4, of the expression “Moabite” as *Semoaba*. The choice is too impersonal for the Hebrew’s personal adjective and leads to clumsy communication. The construction *Semoaba* (Moabite-ish) is constructed from the class 4 prefix *se-* and the noun *Moaba* (see Cole 1955:364). Wookey and BSSA use the more personal class 1 prefix *ba* to produce *Bamoaba* (Moabite) and *ba Moaba* (of Moab). See Cole (1955:70, 364) for the two prefixes.

Wookey

A tsenā kwa go ene; Jehofa a mo naya boimana, a bona ngwana wa mosimane

(He entered at her place; Yahweh gave her pregnancy, and she had a son)

The Wookey Bible was published by the British Foreign Bible Society in 1908, having been translated by Rev. Alfred Wookey (Smit 1970:200). Wookey was appointed by the Bechuanaland District Committee of the LMS to make a thorough revision of the Moffat Bible, but in the process produced the Wookey Bible (Jones, Reyneke and Sandilands 1989). Wookey, like the other reverends who were appointed to translate with him, was academically well-equipped for translation and was conversant in Biblical languages.⁶ He had adequate knowledge of the Setswana language by the time he started to translate, and he was assisted by mother-tongue speakers (Jones, Reyneke and Sandilands 1989:5). The Wookey Bible seems to have been translated by interpreting one or more unidentifiable English Bibles in consultation with a Hebrew manuscript (Berman 2014). Therefore, the shifts in the Wookey Bible can be genuinely ascribed to Wookey's misinterpretation and/or intervention during the process of translation.

BSSA (Bible Society of South Africa)

Ya re a sena go tsenā kwa go ene, MORENA a mo naya boimana, mme a belega ngwana wa mosimane

After he went to her, the LORD gave her pregnancy, and she had a son

The BSSA Bible, published in 1970, is known to have been translated by committees of different missionary organisations that eventually handed the publication rights to the Bible Society of South Africa (Smit 1970:201–203). They translated it entirely from the original languages, although other Bibles were also consulted as models after the first draft (Muller 1958:2). The translators were competent in biblical languages, and mother-tongue speakers were fully involved in the project (Brummerhoff 1964:1).

⁶ The Reverends J. Brown, R. Price and A. J. Wookey were appointed by the Bechuanaland District Committee of the London Missionary Society to make a thorough revision of the whole Moffat Bible. Price died, so the task remained with Wookey and Brown (Smit 1970:200). It is not documented why Brown left the work, but it soon fell to Wookey alone.

Shifts in this Bible can genuinely be ascribed to the translators' misinterpretation and/or intervention during the process of translation.

IDENTIFYING THE SHIFTS IN SETSWANA VERSIONS OF RUTH 4:13

The three Bibles manifest shifts in different ways for this unit. For a start, Wookey and BSSA translate "go into her" as "enter at her place" – *tsena kwa go ene*. As regards form, the Setswana expression manifests an insignificant formal shift because it uses "at" (*kwa*) instead of "in" (*mo*). However, as regards interpretation, the translation manifests a significant functional shift because the Setswana expression is mostly evasive of the source text's meaning. "Arrive at her place" does not indicate that there was sexual contact. On the contrary, the Hebrew source text indicates explicitly, albeit euphemistically, that there was sexual contact. The Setswana expression also suggests that Boaz moved into Ruth's place, whereas that element does not exist in the Hebrew text.⁷

Moffat renders the Hebrew unit word for word and produces the expression *tsena mo go ene* "enter into her". This rendering does not manifest a formal shift because the words are translated from the Hebrew source verbatim.⁸ Yet it causes a functional shift because, first, it is an unfamiliar expression for sexual intercourse, and secondly, whilst scholars have interpreted that this Hebrew expression is euphemistic (Block 1999:91; de Waard and Nida 1991:58), the Moffat expression is rather pornographic. Since it is not an idiomatic reference to sex, it will most likely be deduced from the context of the sentence, which can cause a delay in interpretation. The pornographic element and the delay can rightly be deemed distractions to the source text's meaning, which causes a functional shift.

⁷ Rather, Ruth probably moved into Boaz's house as per the patriarchal cultural tradition.

⁸ Indirectly so because Moffat used the KJV, which had translated the expression literally and verbatim.

PROPOSING CONTEXTS THAT CAUSED THE SHIFTS

For Wookey and BSSA, a socio-cultural frame of reference regarding the subject of sex can be deemed to have influenced the decision-making process that led to this shift. That is because the translators, being competent exegetes, probably knew that the expression referred to sexual intercourse between Boaz and Ruth. Yet, whilst euphemisms for sex and pregnancy are common in Setswana, it appears that the translators considered them to be inappropriate for this unit. The social awkwardness was probably due to the fact that the translators held the couple in high esteem (or deemed the reader to hold the couple in high esteem), and probably felt that reporting on their sexual encounter was awkward. For Moffat, an organisational frame of reference can be postulated as occasioning his shift because he follows the KJV text strictly. That is, in making a word for word rendering of a widely approved Bible version, Moffat followed an established trend among institutions at the time.

Concerning conception, the Bibles have followed the lexeme formally. They use the words *ithwalo* and *boimana*, which are synonyms. Unfortunately this time, formal correspondence led to a socio-culturally awkward target language expression. The target language expression is akin to the choice “pregnancy” (*boimana*) instead of “expectancy” (*itsholofela*) except that in Setswana, the difference is more glaring. Pregnancy is likely to be considered as socially awkward and private in a Setswana socio-cultural context, especially when encountered in a public document like the Bible. It would be better rendered euphemistically. Therefore, the Bibles represent a functional shift because of unnatural communication, which may be distracting or offensive to the audience. It is difficult to postulate the reasons that led to this decision for Wookey and BSSA because their method of translating sexual and reproductive concepts here is inconsistent. Within this unit, it started conservatively and ended on a rather explicit note. Moffat’s methodology, however, was influenced by an organisational frame that allowed or expected him to be as literal as possible. His rendering matches the Hebrew form strictly and explicitly.⁹

⁹ Again, he follows the Hebrew source text only indirectly because he really translates the KJV’s unit, which renders the Hebrew verbatim.

Another notion that needed attention is that of giving birth. Moffat renders this form, too, literally and explicitly as *tsala* (give birth). The effects are similar to those described above – it is a socio-culturally awkward expression. It is used commonly for livestock and animals, but rarely for human beings. Therefore, it can be argued that this Bible manifests a functional shift in the area of natural communication. As with the other units, Moffat’s reason for this decision is apparently organisational, for the translation is formal and literal. Wookey and BSSA use different euphemisms for this expression, namely, *a bona ngwana* (she saw a child – Wookey) and *a belega ngwana* (she put a child on her back – BSSA). While they may seem misleading in English, the euphemisms give a widely accepted interpretation of the concept of “give birth” in Setswana. Hence, they do not represent functional shifts. They manifest significant formal shifts, however, because instead of the literal lexeme for “give birth”, they use “see” and “carry on her back”.

SUGGESTION FOR TRANSLATING RUTH 4:13

To capture adequately the intended sense of the Hebrew, a translation would need to capture euphemistically and precisely the ideas of sex, conception and giving birth. It cannot legitimately avoid accounting for such concepts and still claim to translate the unit. Setswana has several euphemisms for sex, such as *robala le* (sleep with; cf. de Waard and Nida 1991:58). The common one for pregnancy/conception is *itsholofela* (expect oneself). For “give birth”, the most common euphemism is *tshola* (hold). The Hebrew source text unit could, therefore, be rendered as *A robala le ene. Yahwe a mo thusa gore a itsholofele. Mme a tshola ngwana wa mosimane*¹⁰ (In word-for-word back translation – “He slept with her. Yahweh helped her to expect herself. And she held a son”).

This suggestion is an accurate euphemistic rendering of וַיְבֹא אֵלֶיהָ וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה לָּהּ בֶּן (and he went in to her, and Yahweh

¹⁰ For these Setswana euphemisms, see Dent (1992:11) and Hartshorne, Swart and Rantao (1984:534).

gave her conception, and she gave birth to a son” and functionally to “He had sex with her and Yahweh gave her conception; then she gave birth to a son”.

CONCLUSION

The point of departure for this article is the observation that there seems to be no consensus on a systematic methodological procedure regarding the review or improvement of Bible translations. Thus the article seeks to demonstrate how the concept of translation shifts could serve as a starting point for the review or improvement of Bible versions. In this model, the identification and analysis of the shift would enable the reviewer/translator to discover more precisely the differences between the corresponding units of the source text and the target text. Such differences or shifts could be formal, functional or both. Next, the reviewer would investigate the contextual frames of reference that could have led to each shift. By using the contextual frames of reference model, the reviewer will become conscious of his/her own current influential contexts so as to identify and correct the mismatches and to avoid committing similar errors in proposing a more satisfactory rendering. As an illustration, the article matched the translations of the three extant Setswana Bibles, namely Moffat, Wookey and BSSA against the Hebrew text of Ruth 4:13, which translates formally from the Hebrew as “And he went in to her, and Yahweh gave her conception, and she gave birth to a son”. This refers to “He had sex with her and Yahweh gave her conception; then she gave birth to a son”. As might be expected with such potentially awkward social expressions, several shifts occurred, which the article critically evaluated and then proposed a solution to the problems that were identified. Circumstances that could have influenced the various shifts/errors for this textual unit were also postulated.

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