DOUGLAS J. MOO

THE CHALLENGE *of* BIBLE TRANSLATION

An abridged version of an address by Dr. Moo delivered on November 18, 2014 at a banquet celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Commissioning of the NIV. The banquet was held in connection with the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Zondervan

The Challenge of Bible Translation

By Douglas J. Moo

Wessner Chair of Biblical Studies, Wheaton College

Chair, Committee on Bible Translation

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January 2015 marked the beginning of a year-long celebration of the 50-year anniversary of the commissioning of the New International Version (NIV) Bible and the formation of the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT), the group of biblical scholars responsible for the original translation of the NIV and its ongoing revisions. With more than 450 million copies distributed worldwide, the NIV is the most widely read contemporary English translation of the Bible. The 50-year anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on the reasons for the success of the NIV as well as the challenges that still lie ahead of us.

Reasons to celebrate are many. Among them is one that is especially prominent: the broadly evangelical nature of the NIV. The 1970s were the years in which many young people were converted to a form of "basic Christianity" and when the word "evangelical" was finding its place on our cultural map, as George Gallup Jr. recognized when he labeled 1976 "the year of the evangelical." This evangelical movement gave birth to the NIV, and the NIV, in turn, helped to solidify and expand the movement. It is important to realize that from the beginning, the NIV was conceived as a broadly evangelical project. The thirty-two scholars who attended the founding conference in 1965 represented 28 different colleges and seminaries and a broad spectrum of denominations, including Baptist, Presbyterian,

The Evangelical Movement and the Birth of NIV

1965 NIV and CBT commissioned

32 scholars attended the founding conference...

...from 28 diverse colleges and seminaries.

Presbyterian Baptist

Lutheran Methodist Nazarene

1976 "The Year of the Evangelical" - George Gallup Jr.

In the 1970s many young people converted to a form of "basic Christianity."

2015 Over 450 million NIV copies distributed worldwide.

The CBT celebrated the 50th anniversary of the NIV.

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Assemblies of God, Lutheran, Nazarene, Methodist, and Christian Reformed. This inclusiveness has been maintained as the membership of CBT has changed over the years.

The NIV carries the DNA of another hallmark of the evangelical movement: the growing academic sophistication of evangelical biblical scholars. One area of particular significance for the NIV and, of course, all Bible translations is the discipline of linguistics. The 1960s-era documents that set the parameters for the new translation we now call the NIV make no explicit reference to modern linguistic theory. Even so, their translation guidelines clearly betray the influence of the discipline. Of course, translations both before and after the NIV are also built on the foundation of linguistic principles. At the same time, however, some of the most fundamental linguistic principles have been routinely ignored in both biblical interpretation and Bible translation. I would like to highlight three basic linguistics principles.

Three Basic Linguistic Principles

1. Linguistics as a Descriptive Enterprise

The first important principle is to realize that linguistics is not a prescriptive enterprise but a descriptive one. In other words, linguistics describes how language is actually used. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty proclaims, "When I use a word … it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less." But language does not work like that. If we hope at all to communicate with other people,

we need to know how *they actually speak*, not how we think they should speak. No one person or committee of persons can prescribe what words will mean or how they will be used in combination. Rather, the users of a language determine meaning and usage.

Linguists study a given language at a certain point in time with the hope of describing just what is going on. The so-called rules of language usage are simply generalized summaries of usage that never apply to all users of the language and that change over time. This is true for our native language, but also for biblical languages. Lexicographers who build dictionaries (or lexicons) for biblical Hebrew and Greek work hard to determine how words were used at the time the biblical authors spoke and wrote their texts. Translators then make use of these tools, trying their best to understand what, for instance, the prophet Isaiah might have meant by the Hebrew word *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 in the eighth-century BC or what the Greek phrase *pistis Iesou Christou* could have meant for Paul the apostle in the first century AD.

Translators must work with the language as it is; wishing it were otherwise is vain, and forcing into our translations English meanings and constructions that are no longer used by speakers of English is a betrayal of the translator's mission. Humpty Dumpty may choose to invest words with whatever meaning he chooses. But translators who try to impose a meaning on an English word that it no longer has in common speech run the risk of failing to communicate with the audience. We

who translate the Bible run a particular risk here. We are so immersed in the forms of the biblical languages that we can forget that those forms may not, in fact, be good English. I doubt that CBT coined the word, but we often warn ourselves about the danger of translating not into English but into "biblisch" — that is, a form of English so indebted to idioms of the biblical languages that it sounds unnatural in the ears of the typical modern speaker of English.

We must also ask ourselves a crucial question: For whom are we translating? Every translation must have a clear answer to this question. From the beginning, the NIV has sought to be an "international" translation. Two implications flow from this focus. (1) Our translation choices must reckon with our audience's ability to understand English. I tell you nothing you don't already know when I say that fewer and fewer American adults can read effectively. A 2013 study concluded that 35 percent of adults in the US can barely read or read below a fifth grade level. Growing illiteracy poses a significant but sometimes underappreciated problem for translators — and, I might add, for a movement such as ours that is bound up with the accurate interpretation and effective application of a text we believe has come from God.

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But balance is needed here. One scholar recently complained about the way the Common English Bible (CEB) loses the stylistic elegance and even theological meaning of Romans 16:13 by translating "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord" (as in NIV), with "Say hello to Rufus, who is an outstanding believer." While criticism may be justified, we must not forget that translation from one language to another entails tradeoffs and sacrifices. If the average American is reading at best at a seventh- or eighth-grade level, translations cannot necessarily be faulted for trying to hit that target. Some people insist that English translations of the Bible will inevitably contain difficult texts, and it is the ministry of the teacher in the church to make clear the meaning. But how many people reading the Bible have access to a good teacher?

Again, let me say clearly: both sides in this argument make valid points. Every translation committee struggles to keep in balance the sometimes esoteric details of the text with the need to communicate clearly to modern English readers, with the translations leaning to one side or the other. My point here is simply that in talking about translation, we sometimes fail sufficiently to take into account the target audience. Bruce Metzger, who was a key figure in the translation of the RSV and NRSV, stated this well-known translation maxim: "As literal as possible, as free as necessary." The maxim is OK as far as it goes, but it begs the crucial question: "necessary" for whom? For English that college professors find elegant? English that fifth-graders can read with ease? Or, as in the case of the NIV,

Computational Linguistics

The CBT takes advantage of powerful linguistic resources to provide current data about the state of the English language.

Translators access huge databases of both spoken and written global English.

Results for words to describe the *human race* in modern English were:

OVER 4.4 BILLION WORDS SEARCHED

CBT uses this data in the updated NIV, choosing from among these words.

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English that new converts can understand and that preachers can use as a solid platform for biblical exposition?

Our ability to understand the language of our target audience has been significantly enhanced by the rapid advance in computing power. The field of "computational linguistics" harnesses the power of computers to provide broadly current data about the state of the language. To my knowledge, the NIV was the first translation to take significant advantage of this powerful resource. The problem we face on the CBT, as do all translation committees, is to choose the right English word or phrase to communicate the meaning that we have decided is borne by a particular Greek or Hebrew word or phrase. I recall a debate in CBT about translating "desert" or "wilderness." One member, who was born and raised in southeastern Kentucky, insisted we could not use "wilderness" because the word necessarily connoted an area that was heavily forested; others disagreed.

Enter computational linguistics. Translators can now access huge databases of modern English to better understand the current meaning and usage of key words. Knowing that the decisions we would make about translating biblical gender forms into English would be critical, CBT commissioned Collins Dictionaries to pose some key questions to its database of English — the largest in the world, with over 4.4 billion words, gathered from several English-speaking countries and including both spoken and written English. We CBT members had our own ideas about whether, for instance, "man" was still good English for the human race or whether "he" still

carried clear generic significance. So we asked the Collins computational linguists to query their database on these points and others. The results revealed that the most popular words to describe the human race in modern U.S. English were "humanity," "man," and "mankind." CBT then used this data in the updated NIV, choosing from among these three words (and occasionally others) depending on the context.

We also asked the Collins experts to determine which singular pronouns referring to human beings were most often used in a variety of constructions. Consider, for example, Mark 8:36a, which reads in the KJV "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" The Greek, using *anthrōpos*, clearly refers to a human being without regard to gender. How do we say that in modern English? Moving to plural forms is one option, as does the CEB. Shifting to the second person, whose pronouns are not gender specific, is another; the New Living Translation (NLT) goes this route. Another option is to retain the words "man," "he," and "his" of the KJV, as do the English Standard Version (ESV) and Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

But do these words continue to function as true generics in modern English? CBT did not think they did. We were pretty sure that "man" (when applied to a single human being) no longer had a true generic sense, a conclusion borne out by modern style guides and indirectly attested by other modern translations. But we were uncertain about the pronoun to use as the follow-up — "he/him"? "they/their"? So we requested

the Collins linguists to search their database to determine what pronouns were being used in modern English to refer back to indefinite pronouns (such as "each," "one," and "someone") and to non-gender specific nouns (such as "person"). The Collins data revealed that over 90 percent of English speakers and writers were using plural or neutral pronouns to refer back to "someone" — mainly the pronoun "they." Based on these data, then, CBT translated Mark 8:36 as "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"

Now of course, some of you will hear the voice of your seventh-grade English teacher, insisting that one cannot use an apparently plural pronoun such as "their" to refer to the singular pronoun "someone." But here is where we need to invoke again the linguistic principle of descriptiveness. What determines "correct" English is not some nineteenth- or twentieth-century style manual or the English we were taught in grade school but the English that people are actually speaking and writing today. And the data are clear: modern English has latched on to the so-called "singular they," which has been part of English for a long time, as the preferred way to follow up generic nouns and pronouns.

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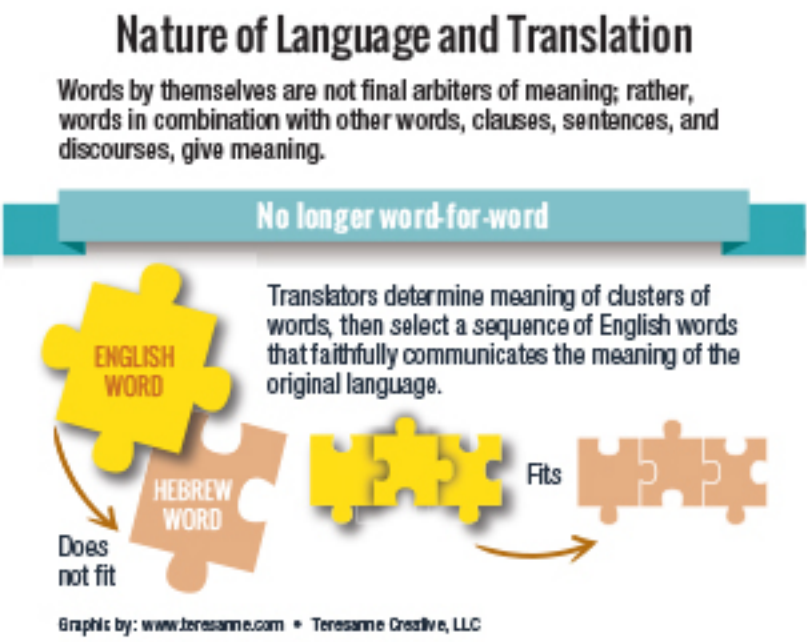
2. Where Meaning Resides

The second important linguistic principle is that meaning resides not at the level of individual words, as vital as they are, but in larger clusters: phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourses. To be sure, there is a lively debate among linguists over the degree to which individual words carry meaning. But there is general agreement that words in themselves are not the final arbiters of meaning. We take this principle for granted in our study of the biblical languages, insisting on the importance of relationships in our word studies. The object I put after the



verb *ginōskō* dramatically affects its sense: "knowing" that Jesus is God is very different from "knowing" God or from God's "knowing" me.

Once again, however, the principle is too easily ignored when translations are being evaluated. Translation is not, as many people think, a matter of word substitution: English word x in place of Hebrew word y. Translators must first determine the meaning that the clustering of words in the biblical languages convey and then select a sequence of English words that communicates that meaning to modern listeners and readers.

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But how important is it to use the precise *form* of a biblical expression? From the beginning, the NIV has taken a mediating position. The manual produced when the translation that became the NIV was first being planned states: "If the Greek or Hebrew syntax has a good parallel in modern English, it should be used. But if there is no good parallel, the English syntax appropriate to the meaning of the original is to be chosen." It is fine, in other words, to carry over the form of the biblical languages into English — but never at the expense of natural expression. In this, CBT is following in the footsteps of Martin Luther, who said of his own German translation:

> *What is the point of needlessly adhering so scrupulously and stubbornly to words which one cannot understand anyway? Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather he must see to it — once he understands the Hebrew author — that he concentrates on the sense of the text, asking himself, "Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation?" Once he has the German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows.*

The principle that meaning resides in larger clusters of words means that we should no longer talk in terms of "word-for-word" as a translation policy. To suggest in our discussion of translations among a general audience that "word-for-word" is a virtue is to mislead people about the nature of language and translation. At the same time, the fact that translations, not words, transfer meaning makes clear that it is foolish to claim that the doctrine of inspiration entails a "word-for-word" translation approach. Such a claim effectively removes the inspiration from those many words and forms that cannot be carried over. More importantly, it badly misunderstands the doctrine itself. Plenary inspiration claims that every word of the original text was inspired by God, and this is why CBT labors over every single word of the original texts, working hard to determine how each of those words contributes to what *the text* is saying. But what we translate are not those individual words but the meaning they convey together.

3. The Meaning of Individual Words

The third linguistic principle is to understand something about the nature of lexical semantics. Every word in any language generally has a range of meaning. Consider the English word "rock." This word can refer to a stone, a particular style of music, something that can be done in a specially designed chair, or a motion that takes place in a boat. If you were to translate the word "rock" into another language, which of these is the "literal" translation of the word? Well, it depends on its usage in the sentence. Yet we write about and talk about the "literal" meaning of a word. Whatever may have been the "original meaning" of a word historically speaking may not shed much light on its meaning in a particular context.

We as professors know this and teach this, but our practice often falls short. As I was editing contributions to a new NIV study Bible, I was dismayed to run across again and again, from fine established scholars, notes that cited an NIV translation and then indicated, as an indirect criticism of the NIV, the "literal" meaning of the word being translated. I have caught myself doing this in my own writing. As good as the NIV is, I am sure there are places where an English word does not accurately convey the sense of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word. And, of course, a particular word can convey more than one sense. But whatever choice is made in translating, it is not a matter of being "literal."

To claim that a word in the biblical languages has a "literal" meaning, capable of being summarized in a single English

The Nature of Lexical Semantics

Words can occupy a spectrum of meanings. Whatever choice is made in translation, it is not a matter of being "literal."

Depending on its usage in a sentence, the word has to be put into context.

Range of meanings for...

ROCK

...which is literal?

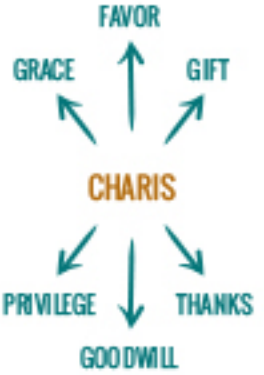
A STONE?

TYPE OF MUSIC?

MOTION OF A BOAT?

Sometimes a single English word will not translate all the meanings of single Greek and Hebrew words.

Here are just a few of the ways that the NIV translates the word Charis:



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equivalent, is simply not true. Words occupy a spectrum of meaning, and the range of meaning of particular Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words is never quite the same as the range of meaning of any particular English word. We understand why the NIV uses eight different English expressions to translate a single Greek word *sarx* in the book of Colossians (note, by the way, that the ESV is not far behind with five different expressions). To criticize these translation decisions as being "not literal" is nonsense. It is true that a biblical author may use a word with a double meaning or create a deliberate "overlap" in its meanings. But it is inaccurate to suggest only one of these meanings is the "literal" translation.

If these observations about lexical semantics are so well accepted, why do we still find ourselves speaking and writing about the "literal" meaning of words? I can think of three reasons. (1) First is what I call "homiletical expediency." The desire to show off our knowledge of the original languages and make a simple and useful point can sometimes lead us to say quite foolish things about words and their meanings. (2) A second reason is simplicity. It is far easier and more economical for me to describe *koinōnia* as "literally, fellowship" than to say "a word with a range of meaning having to do with an association of some kind, whether of people or things." (3) We fall into speaking of words in this way because that is the way biblical languages are taught — and the way we continue to teach. There is plenty of time later to learn about the range of meaning of a word. But here's the catch: does the student

really learn that? Do they move beyond the "gloss" method of the meaning of a word to a more sophisticated understanding of words and their meanings? Or, to bring it home: Do we effectively teach them the realities of language? Do we continue to require our second-year language students to translate "word for word," perpetuating a simplistic and ultimately false view of language?

The work of translating the Bible is a difficult task, and it is made the more difficult because the target language, such as English, is constantly changing. Thus, the challenge of translation is a never-ending task. What is right and good in the NIV today may be ambiguous tomorrow. We are continually challenged to refine the text in light of current scholarship and the changing shape of English. We ask for your prayers as we do this work, so that the NIV will continue accurately to mediate the Word of God to new generations of English speakers all over the world.

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AS WE CELEBRATE the five decades that English readers all over the world have read, studied, and taught the NIV, it is more important than ever that we appreciate the unique combination of accuracy and readability that characterizes the NIV. Understanding some basic issues involved in translating the Bible will give us some insight into the process that has made the NIV what it is.

DOUGLAS MOO taught for twenty-three years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School before moving to Wheaton College, where he is Kenneth T. Wessner Professor of Biblical Studies. He has written ten books, many articles, and has taught at schools around the world. He joined the Committee on Bible Translation in 1996 and has been chair of the committee since 2005.

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