

Choosing a Translation, #2 Changes in Language

Intro: Back in 1675, some nine years after the terrible fire in London, Sir Christopher Wren himself laid the first foundation stone in what was to be his greatest architectural enterprise—the building of St. Paul’s Cathedral. It took him thirty-five long years to complete this task, and when it was done he waited breathlessly for the reaction of her majesty, Queen Anne. After being carefully shown through the structure, she summed up her feelings for the architecture in three words: “It is awful; it is amusing; it is artificial.”

Imagine how you would have felt if words like these were used to describe the work of your life! However, Sir Christopher Wren’s biographer said that on hearing these words, he heaved a sigh of relief and bowed gratefully before his sovereign. How could this be? The explanation is simple: In 1710, the word *awful* meant “awe-inspiring,” the word *amusing* meant “amazing,” and the word *artificial* meant “artistic.” What to our ears might sound like a devastating criticism was in that time words of measured praise.

Without the explanation of the changes in language we might have had a completely different impression of the queen’s attitude toward the work. And the story illustrates one of the issues in the consideration of Bible translations—languages change over time.

Last week we notice that the question of which translation is best centers around three important issues:

The first falls into the realm of textual criticism, the study of how the scriptures have come to us. Does the translation present only what can be established as the original words of God in the autographs?

The second falls into the realm of linguistics, the study of language itself. Does the translation accurately convey the thought of the original message? Does it do so in language readily understandable by the reader?

The third falls into the realm of theology or interpretation, the study of the meaning of Scripture itself. Does the translation reflect theological bias or prejudice in translating?

Two key changes have occurred that have affected the production of newer English translations.

Change in the understanding of ancient languages

Last week in our story of how the English Bible came to us we focused on the discovery of many new manuscripts that made it possible to have a better understanding of the original readings of the NT. In addition, during this same period there was also a great increase in knowledge about both the Hebrew and Greek language.

Daniel Wallace points out that: “At one time there were over a thousand words in the Scriptures that had no presence in any other

known literature of the ancient world. Now that list is down to 50 or less with most of the discoveries having been made in the last century. Such discoveries are good for the most accurate translation of NT words.”

This new understanding made it possible for Greek and Hebrew scholars to have a better understanding of words that had been previously uncertain or obscure.

Change in the English language itself

In the period from 1611 to the 20th century the English language changed dramatically. There were two important changes in particular:

Changes in the meaning of words commonly used

Changes in the style of the language

During the time when the KJV was translated the general population in English talked differently than they do today.

In Old English the 2nd person singular usage in speaking to another was to say “thou” or “thee”. The 2nd person plural usage was to say “ye” and “you”. Verbs had “th” attachments like “praiseth” or “worketh”. These peculiarities of Old English were passed on in Middle and “modern” English of the 16th century and onward.

Here’s an example of how people talked in the 1600’s in England. Thomas Blenerhasset’s Direction for the Plantation in Ulster (1610) is a propaganda piece designed to encourage Englishmen of all classes to settle in Ireland:

To conclude, what art thou? One whom kindness, casualty, want of wit hath decayed? Make speed, get thee to Ulster, serve God, be sober; if thou canst not govern, be governed. Thou shalt recover thyself, and thy happiness there will make thee rejoice at thy former fortunes. (Norton Anthology of English Literature)

Thus, the KJV was translated into the contemporary English of the early 1600’s!

Thee (objective) and thou (subjective) were chosen when there was a single person addressed.

Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. (Matthew 4:10)

Ye (subjective) and you (objective) were chosen when there was a plurality of persons addressed.

I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins. (John 8:24)

In 1611 people used “thees” and “thous” and “thys” in talking to one another. They did not consider those expressions more reverential. They were certainly not a “spiritual vocabulary” to be used at church and nowhere else!

*They were not terms to be used exclusively in addressing God!
In fact, such terms were used in addressing despicable
characters like Pontius Pilate or the devil.*

*Jesus answered him, Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did
others tell it thee of me? (John 18:34)*

However the linguistic use of these pronouns was in a state of change that would eventually eliminate them in common speech, though they found continued expression in the language of the Friends (or Quakers) and in poets who were emulating Elizabethan and Jacobean literature.

(Because of the prevalence of the KJV, there was an interesting perpetuation of these forms in American religious speech. People who did not use them in everyday speech continued to use them in prayers. As time has gone on those who grew up with these expressions have continued to use them. Some in the middle generation have found themselves awkwardly trying to use both; and most new converts uninfluenced by the traditions just use the contemporary English.) But because of the language itself, modern translations now choose to use the modern English pronoun “you” rather than the Old English forms. Doing so does not reflect irreverence for God (since the forms were not originally used out of respect for God) but to put the word of God in the language of the people.

The newer translations reflect these changes and bring two benefits for modern readers

More accurate translations

The newer translations select from our modern English more appropriate synonyms for the Greek terms that better express the idea of the original. This results in the replacement of words commonly used in 1611 for those equivalent terms used in the present day. When I first began preaching I used the KJV and found myself constantly explaining that words found in the KJV had a different meaning than they currently do. For example:

In 1611 the word “conversation” meant “lifestyle”; in the 20th century it came to mean “speech”.

*Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;
(Philippians 1:27)*

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, (Philippians 1:27, NKJV)

In 1611 the word “suffer” meant “permit”; in the 20th century it means to feel pain.

*But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 19:14)*

*But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven."
(Matthew 19:14)*

In 1611 the word "study" meant "to give diligence"; in the 20th century it means to engage in academic exercise.

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

Wallace cites at least 300 such words in the KJV that have different modern equivalents.

Greater clarity of communication (understandability)

Newer versions typically follow the conventions of our modern speech using simply "you" rather than "thou, thee, ye, you". They use common verb endings and modern syntax.

Though it is still English, Elizabethan English is more difficult for people to understand who are not used to its expressions. Expressions commonly understood in 1611 are quite strange to many of us. Which makes more sense to you?:

*Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; (2 Corinthians 8:1)
And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. (2 Corinthians 8:1)
And again he entered into Capernaum after some days; and it was noised that he was in the house. And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door: and he preached the word unto them. And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four. And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay.
(Mark 2:1-4)*

*And when He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. And they *came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. And being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. (Mark 2:1-4)*

Almost everyone would admit that the latter translations are far more understandable to the average person who would read these two texts. And so there is a benefit in reading in our modern speech. The usage of modes of expression we are accustomed to advances our ability to understand what is being said and to move to the discussion of what it means and how it is applied.

It is interesting to note that that is how it started out! The Scriptures were originally given in the common contemporary Greek of the NT world! The KJV was translated into the common contemporary English of the people of the early 1600's. Why then should people be resistant to the idea of translated the word of God into the contemporary English of the people of the late 20th century?

Conclusion: All things being equal almost all the newer versions translate in English that is more readily understandable to a person of good reading skills. There is however one danger. We may often use the understandability of a version as a criteria for selection without consideration of the accuracy of the translation. Poor translations can be easily understood too! So it is imperative that we think about two more issues—method of approach and translational bias.