

**Hermeneutical issues involved in translation—**  
**What challenges arise from translating the Bible? How do we manage these challenges?**  
**Lesson Outline<sup>1</sup>**

1. Translate Kiswahili and English passages
  - a. Provide some Kiswahili sentences (it can be from anything, even fake conversations).
  - b. Translate these passages into literal, “wooden” English. This will result in some awkward English translations. For example, we translate “Unaitwa nani?” as “What is your name?” The literal translation, however, would be “Who are you called?” We don’t say that in English because it would sound awkward. Therefore, we “smooth” it out for English speakers.
  - c. This is the challenge of translation. Different languages do not have one-to-one translations for every word.
  - d. Language and culture are also inseparable. For example, there are three different words for “rice” in Kiswahili but only one word in English.
2. Why do we have different translations?

General translation philosophies<sup>2</sup>

- Dynamic/Functional equivalence (thought-for-thought)
  - E.g. NLT or NIV

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More readable</li> <li>• Priority on conveying meaning; less ambiguity in the meaning of the English</li> <li>• Easy for a non-Christian or new Christian to read and comprehend</li> <li>• Good for public Scripture reading</li> <li>• More interpretation by trained scholars</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less correspondence to the form of the original text</li> <li>• More interpretation of the original text</li> <li>• Impossible to trace the same form of a word used by the biblical writers</li> <li>• Often more expansive by using a phrase or sentence to explain a technical term</li> <li>• Not as good for careful Bible study</li> </ul>

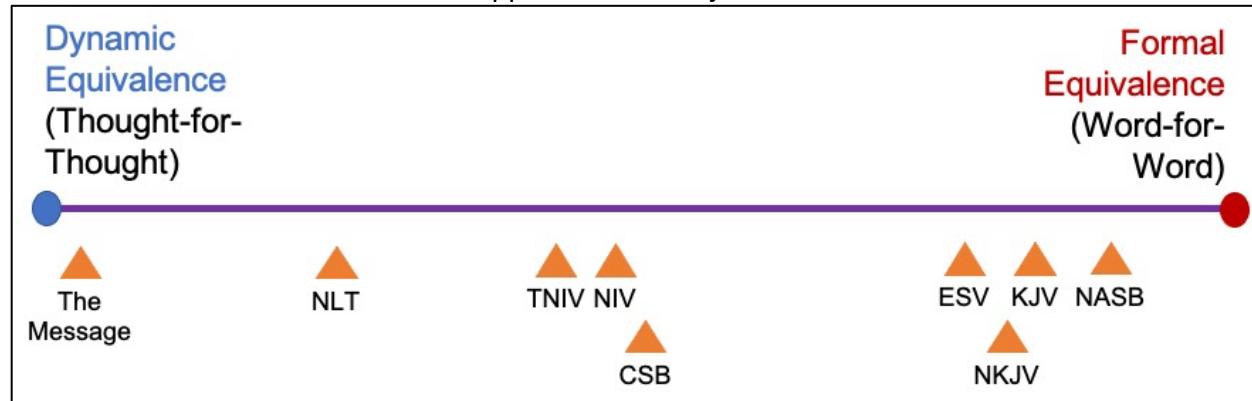
<sup>1</sup> Most of the following outline is directly dependent on the teaching that I received from Robert Plummer during his hermeneutics class at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Not all quoted material appears in quotations.

<sup>2</sup> The comparisons in the following tables are from the article “It’s All Greek to Me” by Clinton Arnold in *Discipleship Journal*, 132, Nov/Dec 2002.

- Formal or literal equivalence (word-for-word)
  - NASB--may be most literal, word for word translation but is not written in a way that we normally speak in English
  - ESV--still formal but more readable than NASB

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word-for-word correspondence with the original text</li> <li>• Less interpretation of the original text; less reliance on the translator for an accurate interpretation</li> <li>• Easier to trace the same form of a word used by the biblical writers</li> <li>• More precision by using complex vocabulary and theological terminology</li> <li>• Better for in-depth biblical study</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awkward English at times</li> <li>• More ambiguity in the meaning of the English; relies on the reader for more interpretation</li> <li>• More difficult for a non-Christian or new Christian to read and comprehend</li> <li>• Not as good for public Scripture reading</li> <li>• May lead readers to reach wrong interpretive conclusions in a casual reading</li> </ul>

### Translation Approaches of Major Bible Versions<sup>3</sup>



3. The challenge: Language is a part of culture, and no two cultures are the same.  
Language is an expression of our culture
  - a. Translation is not a math equation like  $2 = 2$ . There are similarities, but no two languages are exact in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, etc.
4. Qualities of a good translation
  - a. Should be based on best Greek and Hebrew Manuscripts. All modern translations do this except for NKJV.
  - b. Should be based on latest knowledge of languages and culture. That knowledge continues to increase as we look at extra-biblical sources to gain better understanding of the original language and culture (e.g. begotten --> only son)

<sup>3</sup> This diagram is adapted from the article "It's All Greek to Me" by Clinton Arnold in *Discipleship Journal*, 132, Nov/Dec 2002.

- c. Should be accurate—sometimes most “accurate” translations are not the most readable (e.g. NASB).
- d. Should be understandable—e.g. gird a towel vs. wrap a towel around waist
- e. Should be contemporary—When the Greek NT was written, it was written into the contemporary language of people. Same with KJV. But that is not how we speak today. (E.g. Charity meant love back then. Today it means to give money to people in need; “suffer” the children meant “allow” or “let”; “let” meant “hinder”)
- f. Should be universal—don't limit it to Australian, English, etc. dialect. Make it universal for English speakers.
- g. Should be dignified—some literal translations give a sense of distraction and/or are undignified (KJV translates a verse as “one who pisseth against the wall”). This brings a sense of indignity to service. E.g., KJV says close your bowels vs. close your hearts. The literal translation sounds undignified.
- Should avoid theological bias—Don't introduce personal bias. Printing errors can do this. “Though *shalt* commit adultery”, “Sin *on* more”. There are also “packaging” errors. Marketers sometimes add things like “What do guys really think of girls?” to draw attention to the Bible as if the Word is not enough.

## 5. Controversies

- a. Gender neutral pronouns—The NIV's desire was to make the translation better reflect modern English. For example, instead of simply saying, “Brothers,” the translation would read “Brothers and sisters.” These changes *only* occurred when it was clear that the biblical writer was addressing both men and women. There are *no* instances of the use of gender neutral language when the biblical writer was only addressing men or women. The NIV translators left these instances as gender specific. Some have accused the NIV of caving to political/cultural pressure of the day.
- b. Updated language with new editions of a translation—Translations need to be updated because language is constantly changing. Some have claimed that new editions are “changing” the Bible because certain words are different than before. This isn't a change to the Bible, however. It is simply updating the translation to reflect the changes in the English language (or any target language).
- c. New research based on more reliable manuscripts resulting in changes to translations—Translations like the KJV and NKJV do not use the oldest manuscripts like other major English translations do (e.g. NIV, ESV, NET, NASB, etc.). This results in some differences between the KJV/NKJV and other translations.

## 6. Which Bible translation should you read?

- a. Depends on what you're doing
  - i. For devotional reading and/or reading large chunks of Scripture, consider using a more dynamic translation because it better reflects how most people speak.

- ii. For deep Bible study and examining smaller chunks of Scripture, consider a formal equivalent translation.
- b. The best translation is the one you'll read! The most important thing is that you are reading God's Word. We should not let our churches become divided over which translation is "best." There is no perfect translation. We are very fortunate, however, to have multiple excellent English translations. This is especially true considering that many, many people across the world *still* do not have access to the Bible in their language.