

THE DEMOCRATISATION OF TRANSLATION: TENTATIVE STEPS TO “NEW TRANSLATION”

CARL GROSS

gross2oz@gmail.com

The author is a Translation Consultant based in Australia.

In Europe in the Middle Ages, the Bible was in Latin. Only scholars and the clergy had the privilege of reading it. There were some versions in distant languages like Georgian, Armenian, and Coptic, and there had been some tentative attempts to translate into local vernaculars, but in general the Bible was a closed book to most people. Only a small proportion of the people could read it.

For English, the democratisation of the Bible, that is, making the Bible available to ordinary people, began with the work of John Wyclif and William Tyndale. Tyndale is said to have once told a clergyman that he wanted even a farm boy who drives a plough to know more of the Scriptures than the clergyman Tyndale was talking to. This is similar to Martin Luther’s statement that the language of a German translation should reflect the way that “the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace” speak (Newman 1996, 4). For their efforts, all of these men were condemned as heretics, Tyndale was burned at the stake, and Luther only escaped with his life because he had powerful political friends.

The major explosion in Bible translation in the past two hundred years has made the Scriptures accessible to people of over 2500 language groups and to well over 90 percent of the world’s population. This has been a true democratisation of the Bible, and the Bible Society movement has helped through its support of countless translation projects, translators, consultants, typesetters, printers, and so on, throughout the world. We have developed models and tools to assist translators, guidelines, rules, and procedures to show how it should be done, and even new theories of how to do it—*dynamically*. We have tried to maintain very high standards in every part of the process, from giving weeks of training for translators to employing highly qualified consultants to check and approve the translations. It is right that we should have done so.

This system has served us well, but it is very expensive, as the constant strain on budgets shows. While costs continue to rise, the amount of money available to support translations is decreasing, and projects are being squeezed in the middle. The traditional needs haven’t diminished, and yet new translation programs are being added. All of this threatens to derail the Bible Society vision of a translation for everyone who wants one in a language they can understand.

If we continue to use our current system, the goal of Bible translation will never be achieved. In fact, we will continue to fall farther and farther behind the needs. I have therefore described the present system as “old translation,” and we

need to develop a “new translation.” We need to look for new ways of doing things, to find ways to accomplish the translation task more efficiently, more quickly, and more cheaply. The only way to do that, I suggest, is to “democratise” translation, that is, to take it out of the hands of experts and entrust the task to the people by enabling and empowering them to do it. Just as people like Wyclif, Tyndale, and Luther tried to empower the common people to be able to understand the Holy Scriptures in the late Middle Ages by democratising the Scriptures through their translations, so we need to empower more ordinary people to embark on the task of translation. This will involve the democratisation of the translation process, so that Bible translation is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” This will involve breaking down the fence of the power and privilege of experts, and giving people appropriate tools that they can readily use, and then letting them go to it. Not totally by themselves and not without help, for they always look for help, but by letting those who are motivated “get on with the job” in a way that will produce useful and usable results.

Many people are highly motivated to work on translation in their own language. Let me give one example of people who were greatly motivated, but the results of whose efforts were not particularly useful. In 1992, a volume of about 75 percent of the New Testament was published for a small language group in northern Australia. No further Bible Society translation work was done there, but after about a decade, we suddenly heard that two grandmothers had drafted the whole of the rest of the Bible, handwritten with pencil and paper! The story went out that they did the first draft in the beach sand, but that seems to have been apocryphal, dreamt up by an imaginative fund-raiser. This is an example of local common people getting motivated to translate the Scriptures and doing it very much by the “old-style” method—you can’t get much more “old-style” than pencil and paper!

So, being motivated is not the answer. By itself, it will not help us reach our goal. But the aim of this article is to introduce readers to two tools which might actually help to achieve that goal. Developed by people working with the Seed Company and SIL, they are available free for translators to use.

OurWord

Almost as close to pencil and paper as one can get in an electronic world, OurWord is a very basic and simple program to use. Once a project is set up, OurWord opens a “blank book” in which the text to be translated is in the left column and blank spaces, in which the translation is to be typed, are in the right-hand column (see Figure 1).

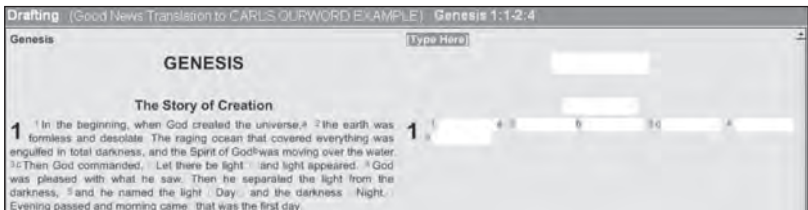


Figure 1

Then it is simply a matter of typing text in the box provided. The flashing <Type Here> indicates where to type. But better than pencil and paper is the fact that the exemplar text* is permanently in the left hand column, with the receptor language translation precisely aligned to the right of the original. The boxes are numbered with the verse numbers of the original, and they expand to accommodate as much or as little text as the receptor language needs to express the meaning (see Figure 2). There are boxes for illustration captions and footnotes, and the project can be set up to insert automatically the receptor language’s spelling of the books of the Bible when they are quoted in cross references. The text can be corrected, revised, and “cut-and-pasted” at will, without the need of an eraser, so it is clearly better than the pencil and paper method!



Figure 2

If in doubt, users of OurWord can insert notes under ten colour-coded categories to remind themselves to do something, like check a point with a reviewer or consultant, record the reason a certain rendering was chosen, comment on the exemplar text, or retain a discarded rendering for later reference. They can easily use different files for subsequent drafts, and produce a back-translation. They can print out any portion of any translation for review, checking, or even use in church. Finally, they can export their work easily in Paratext-friendly Standard Format Markup files for final printing.

The best aspects of this program are its basic goals and simplicity of use. It provides an easy workspace that inspires confidence even in beginners, and it produces a result that is compatible with the requirements of modern typesetting and printing practices. On the negative side, however, it requires that translators be, or become, comfortable with using a computer. But that applies to all computer-based tools. It is a skill that must be learned and practised, because even people who are familiar with using a computer may not be able to translate directly on the computer. It is not likely that someone will produce a good translation if he or she is still concentrating on finding the right keys on the keyboard.

* I have chosen to use the term “exemplar text” instead of “source text” to refer to the text that is used by the translator or adapter as the immediate basis of their translation. The term “source text” is usually reserved for the original source texts, namely, the Hebrew and Greek originals, so I will avoid using it.

Unfortunately, even though it uses modern technology and may help many translators a great deal, OurWord is still “old-style” translation, because the translator still faces the creative grind of producing a translation directly from a source or exemplar text. OurWord takes some of the hassle out of the process, because it shows so clearly what needs to be translated, and it places the newly-translated text right next to the exemplar text for easy reference. This has to be easier than having one or more Bibles open on one’s desk and writing the translation on a separate sheet of paper or in an exercise book. And, as with other computer-based tools, corrections and revisions are much easier to do on the computer.

Adapt It

A more promising tool in the democratisation of translation may be Adapt It. Adapt It is a program that does more than provide an easy-to-use environment to enter text onto a computer; it actually does some of the more straightforward translation tasks automatically. It doesn’t do this by itself. The translator must build up a database (Adapt It calls it a “knowledge base”) from which the program makes “intelligent” guesses on the meaning of the words. The database builds up gradually as the translator works on the translation, going very slowly at first because most of the words are not yet in the database, but gradually going faster and faster as the database becomes big enough for the program to suggest the meaning of more and more words. The farther one progresses, the more possible it is for the program to fill in the translation for four or five consecutive words, eventually even perhaps a whole verse.

It is this ability of Adapt It to suggest renderings of words that have been used previously that enables it to be described as “new translation.” No longer does the translator have to create the translation from either the source text, or an exemplar text, completely from scratch. Instead he or she is able to view the options shown by the program and choose which alternative is best or, if none of the alternatives given is accurate in the new context, insert the appropriate rendering. For many of the words which have basically a single meaning and which are used consistently, the translator does not need to do anything but allow the program to continue to fill in the blanks.

Adapt It is a bit more complicated to set up than OurWord, but once it is up and running, it is very easy to operate. Like OurWord, Adapt It places the translated text very close to the exemplar text. Where OurWord aligns the translated text with the exemplar text side-by-side in two columns, Adapt It places the newly-translated text in the line below the exemplar, aligned word-for-word. An empty box indicates the place where work is to start (see Figure 3). The translator needs to type the correct translation into the box, and then press <Enter>. At that point, the box advances to the next word and waits for the translator to insert the appropriate translation. But after the database becomes big enough, one of two things might happen:

1. The program will automatically insert a translation into the box and go straight on to the next word.

- The program will stop at the next word and show a drop-down window, giving all the alternative renderings that have already been used. The program waits until the translator chooses the most appropriate one, or types in another rendering that is more appropriate to that context (see Figure 3).

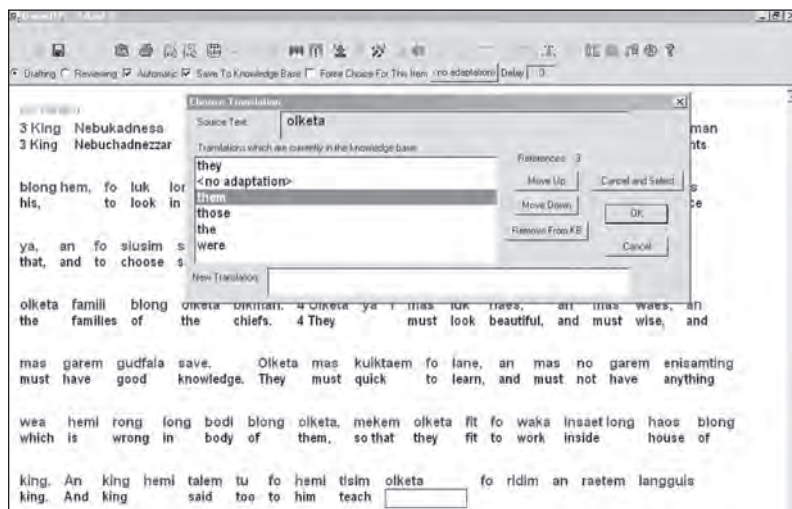


Figure 3

During this process, translators need to keep their wits about them because translation decisions face them every second. When the program automatically inserts a translation, it does so in a split second, and when it comes to a word it does not know, it stops and demands a decision from the translator on how to render the term. This is by no means a mindless exercise for the translator, where the “program does it all,” but it does help the translator who is not confident, and gives encouraging reinforcement from the very earliest stages of the translation process.

A word of warning is necessary for when the program automatically inserts a translation in the box and goes on to the next word, especially early in the translation process. The translator must look carefully at the translation that the program has inserted to make sure that the meaning is correct, because it may be that the database has not yet had all the possible alternatives incorporated in it. But thereafter, it speeds up the translation because new words are inserted in a split second, far more quickly than the time taken to type them.

There are a number of advantages when the program stops and shows the different alternatives that have already been used. By giving a list of alternatives, it makes the decisions of translation easier and removes the frustrating feeling of knowing you’ve met this term before, but not remembering exactly where, or how you rendered it previously. It gives new translators immediate reinforcement and encouragement when they are still learning and it will help even experienced translators to maintain greater consistency.

As in OurWord, it is also possible in Adapt It to attach notes to the text as reminders to check something later or to ask questions of a consultant. And it is possible to export the translation, either in rich text format (RTF) for printing, or as text (TXT) files for loading into Paratext.

Adapt It works best when the receptor language is very similar to the language of the exemplar text. By following the exemplar word for word, it produces a draft that follows the structure of the exemplar closely. This could be frustrating where there are minor structural differences between the two languages, for example, if one language places adjectives before the noun and the other places them after the noun, or where one language has a single word that covers a phrase in the other language. In such cases, it is very important to review the draft carefully to make sure that the second draft sounds natural in the receptor language.

There are a couple of features in Adapt It that the translator can use when the receptor language is too different from the language of the exemplar. One involves the ability to “make a phrase.” Normally, Adapt It renders everything word by word, but this feature makes it possible to designate two or more words as a phrase instead of having Adapt It regard them as separate words (for example, in Pijin, *insaet long* literally means ‘inside in,’ but the two words must be used together when referring to “inside” a house). The second adaptive feature is “free translation mode” in which the translator is able to diverge from the exemplar text. This mode is valuable if the translator wishes to diverge from the interpretation of the exemplar text, or in cases where a clause requires significant reworking. However, it would be very clumsy and time consuming to use it for regular, but minor, structural differences, like the differences in word order that I have already mentioned. These features highlight the fact that the closer the receptor language is to the language of the exemplar, the more efficient Adapt It will be.

There are a number of major benefits in the use of Adapt It:

1. By assisting and giving immediate positive reinforcement, it will encourage new translators to begin a translation project, and stick with it.
2. It will assist even experienced translators in maintaining high consistency in their renderings.
3. By doing some of the “hack work” automatically, it will speed up the first draft process, and the larger the database, the more capacity there is for automatic action.
4. It minimises unintentional deviations of exegesis from the exemplar text, and, if used properly, exegetical errors introduced deliberately.
5. As a consultant, and not a translator, I can see that it may be a valuable tool for producing back-translations in some circumstances.

Appropriateness of Adapt It use

When any new technology is introduced, some people initially oppose its use for a variety of reasons. They may be uncomfortable with the technology that is being used, they may doubt its reliability, they may be jealous of its inventors,

or they may fear financial losses. Adapt It has already received some opposition from parts of the translation community.

There *are* dangers involved in the use of Adapt It. When a large database is developed, the automatic insertion of possible renderings is bewilderingly fast, and the user must take extreme care to check that the renderings suggested by the program are indeed appropriate and the best ones in the context. Thus users must not rely on the computer to do all their work for them. A sloppy user of Adapt It will produce a sloppy draft, just as a sloppy translator using pencil and paper will produce sloppy work. But a careful user will be able to produce a good draft in which the use of terminology is very consistent—and it will take much less time than doing a draft in the traditional way.

Adapt It is not suitable for all translations. It requires that the target language be very similar to the exemplar language, for example, different dialects of the same language. It will not be much help if the languages are too far apart, and so, obviously, it should not be used in such circumstances. It is particularly useful where the languages have similar sentence and discourse structures, as it can handle differences on a word level much more easily than at higher levels. As a tool, it should be used in appropriate circumstances only. Where sociolinguistic factors of animosity or status issues between two language groups are present, similar questions need to be addressed when using Adapt It as when following the traditional approach.

The quality of the end-product of Adapt It also depends a great deal on the quality of the exemplar text used. The style and exegetical decisions of the latter will fundamentally affect the nature and quality of the new translation, in just the same way as a translation done from KJV or NIV will be very different from one done from GNB. This is where the need for adequate consultant checking comes in. Some have criticised Adapt It for this, pointing out that Adapt It does not use the Hebrew or Greek as its “source text.” These critics ignore the fact that the majority of translations done through major translation organisations like Bible Society or SIL are done in the first instance from NIV or GNB or NLT (or equivalent versions in other languages), not the Hebrew or Greek. Adapt It projects *must* be consultant-checked, as much as the traditional projects done in our respective organisations.

Finally, the effectiveness of Adapt It has been described as “not yet proven.” This is an intriguing charge against a relatively new tool. Many translators have already used it with great benefit, and surely it is desirable to try it out to see if it stands up to the test. Even Paratext was once a new, “not yet proven” tool! The more Adapt It can be tested in different translation projects, using reliable exemplar texts, the more the program can be refined and, if necessary, improved.

None of the arguments advanced against it seem to me to provide valid reasons for discouraging the use of Adapt It, or refusing to allow the best available texts to be used as exemplars.

Summary

Apart from the price, that is, free, the best part of both the programs discussed in this article is that they are easy to learn and easy to use, and they help new

translators grow more confident as they begin their work in Bible translation. Both programs, therefore, promise to contribute significantly to the democratisation of translation. People who are comfortable with computers and are able to translate directly onto the computer will find that OurWord will be a useful and efficient way of producing a translation. It will be very helpful at the first draft stage, and after that, because the text is in proper electronic form, it will make the editing, typesetting, and printing stages more efficient.

Adapt It, on the other hand, does more than OurWord. It is as easy to use and it produces equally useful outputs, but its ability to make suggestions of how to translate words means that the translation process will be speeded up and the translation should end up being more consistent. In some cases, it might be an easy and efficient way of producing back-translations for consultants.

But we cannot assume that Adapt It will solve all our translation problems. The output of Adapt It should be seen as a first draft only, and must be subject to the usual processes of checking. Careful checking for comprehension and style is needed to ensure that the text is communicating well in the target language. And rigorous consultant checking remains essential. There will be some projects for which Adapt It is not appropriate at all, and there will be others where the amount of revision needed will outweigh the benefits it provides. Translators are encouraged to experiment with these two programs and to use them if, and only if, they find them useful and helpful.

Reference

Newman, Barclay M., et al. 1996. *Creating & Crafting the Contemporary English Version: A New Approach to Bible Translation*. New York: American Bible Society.