The Fourth Criterion of a Good Translation

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Introduction

In a 1998 article in *Notes on Translation,* T. David Andersen suggested ”perceived authenticity” as a fourth criterion of a good translation. The other three criteria are well known to SIL translators: accuracy, naturalness, and clarity. The latter three are concerned with the use of translation principles, linguistics, theology, and communication theory in the exegesis of the source text and the production and testing of the translated text. They can be used to measure the quality of a translation in a reasonably objective way. The fourth criterion is different in that it is concerned with how the intended receptor audience evaluates the text without necessarily having been trained in translation principles. It is relevant for measuring the subjective quality of a translation in the sense of how the audience feels about the translation. Do they accept it as a good, quality translation? What intuitive criteria do they use to accept or reject it? They probably expect an ”accurate” translation, but what do they understand by that term? (Many people equate accuracy with literalness. Because of a tradition of literal translations, some people feel that an accurate translation cannot also be natural and clear.) Ernst-August Gutt, in the same *NOT* issue as Andersen’s article, underscored the need to consider carefully the expectations the intended audience has concerning the type of translation they would be ready to accept and use.

The purpose of this article is to revisit these two issues and suggest that *acceptability* would be a better term for a fourth criterion than *authenticity*. The reason for this shift of terminology will be explained shortly. I agree with Gutt that the expectations of the intended audience are of crucial importance for the success of every Bible translation project. If those expectations are different from the expectations and assumptions of the translation team—which they often are—the team has some work to do in order to ensure that the translated Scriptures will eventually be accepted and used by the intended audience.

However, we need to make a careful distinction between an initial, uninformed acceptability (or lack of it) and a long-term, well-informed acceptability. The intended audience probably has strong opinions about what Bible translation is or should be. But are these opinions well founded? Anderson rightly emphasizes that translation involves a good deal of compromise between the four basic criteria and therefore requires constant dialogue between the translation team and the receptor audience, represented primarily by reviewers and opinion leaders. Scripture-use activities and translation activities must go hand in hand in any translation project from the beginning to the end of the project. How the time is to be divided between these two types of activities depends on many factors, such as the size of language group, the local church and mission history, the current state and strength of the church as well as the presence and activities of other organizations working in the area.

In many, but not all, of the ethnic groups SIL works with in Africa there is some church presence already and therefore some familiarity with a Bible translation in a national language or lingua franca. In most cases such translations are of the literal type, and it is therefore natural for the local people to expect any translation to be of that same familiar type. This is what I call an initial, uninformed expectation. As we have taught such people the benefits of a meaning-based translation, it is my experience that almost all of them will readily accept that this new type of translation is superior to the old type. The professional clergy will usually be much harder to convince than the ordinary churchgoer or the non-Christians. They need to be shown that a meaning-based translation is superior in several ways. First, it is enjoyable to read and listen to a translation that is natural and makes use of the richness of the language, especially its idioms. Second, it is nice to be able to understand what the Bible says without the need for an expert to explain it. Third, a meaning-based translation is actually more accurate in communicating the intended meaning of the original text than a literal translation, contrary to the assumptions of most people. By teaching people the benefits of a meaning-based translation their expectations can be changed and an initial rejection of the translation can be turned into acceptance of that same translation.

I have been involved in training courses for Bible translators in East Africa since 1978, and with Bible translation into the Sabaot language on a full-time basis from 1981 to 1991. Since then, I have been working as a translation consultant.

For the last ten years we have conducted a three-week introductory course in translation principles every year. Each year our students come to the course convinced that they know what translation is. After all, they grew up in a multilingual society, have done translation exercises in school, and have heard many spoken messages interpreted on the spot. Most of them come expecting to do a literal translation of the Bible, because that concept is what the missionaries brought along and that is what the major national-language translation has modelled. When they finish the course, they say, ”We thought we knew what translation was, but now we know that we didn’t know. Thank you for enlightening us.”

I am saying this to underscore that the intuitive, uninformed understanding of translation principles we find in our target audiences, as well as among many missionaries and theologians, is different from what SIL and professional translators believe translation to be. Or, put in a different way, what they consider a good-quality, accurate translation is not what we consider a good-quality translation, that is, an accurate, clear, and natural translation. Most people, who are not trained in translation principles do not think in terms of accuracy, naturalness, and clarity. They intuitively focus on the word level and tend to think of translation as matching words across languages. This understanding shapes their definition of accuracy.

Authenticity of a translation

I would like to comment briefly on the use of the word *authenticity* as a measure of a good translation. The problem I have with this is that the word has a primary and secondary sense, and these two senses were not clearly distinguished in Andersen’s article mentioned above. The primary sense is ”genuine, of undisputed origin or authorship.” The secondary (derived) sense is ”trustworthy, reliable.” When Andersen gives the example of a letter to the bank with his signature, the primary meaning of *authentic* is in focus. Is it genuine? Is this letter what it purports to be? Was it truly written by the person who claims to have written it and was the signature made by that person? My claim is that a translation

neither can nor should be authentic in the *primary* sense of that word, because translation is different from original authorship. I don't think it is valid to draw a conclusion about the authenticity of a translation in the secondary sense based on Andersen's example of a letter to his bank because in the example he uses the word in its primary sense.

It is possible to ask whether a *copy* of a written text presents the same text that the original author produced or whether it is different in content from the original. This includes that the same language and words have been used. Once the text is translated into another language, other words must obviously be used, and it is no longer applicable to talk about the translation as authentic in the sense of originality. Rather, we need to talk about whether the translated text communicates the same message as the original text. Even a translation of a legal document that is certified by an appropriate authority as a correct translation is not authentic in the primary sense. What the certification does is to make it *trustworthy* (assuming that the certifying authority is known and accepted). Part of the job of a translation consultant is to do such certification of the translation of biblical texts. That is why the credentials of a translation consultant are important.

Since the secondary sense of *authentic* is "trustworthy, reliable," that sense may be used of a translation, but it begs the question. What *makes* a translation trustworthy? That depends on your view of translation, your tradition, and your expectations. Andersen gives several examples of this. Many Christians today, for a number of different reasons, will still trust only a literal translation. Some may trust a translation if they know and trust the translators, others if their pastor recommends it. This secondary sense of *authentic* is not all that far from *acceptable.* Nevertheless, I much prefer *acceptable* to *authentic,* because it is a clear word that focuses on the people to whom it is acceptable. It reminds the translation team of the need for Scripture-use activities in order to make sure that the translation is acceptable to the receptor audience.

The most important way of ensuring acceptability is to enter into dialogue with and educate the receptor audience. If they are not open to rethinking their position, then the translation team may have to adjust the style of the translation towards their expectations. It may even be necessary to sacrifice some principles of clarity, naturalness, or even accuracy in order to gain acceptability, because acceptability is absolutely crucial.

An alternative measure is to have two translations, one of a conservative, literal type and another of a progressive, meaning-based type. This is the current situation in many of the major languages of the world. English, of course, has not just two translations, but a whole spectrum.

In our translation training courses in Kenya, we have for a long time talked about a fourth criterion for a good translation. (This is also mentioned in Katy Barnwell's book, *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course in Basic Bible Translation Principles,* which we use as our main textbook.) If accuracy, naturalness, and clarity are like the indispensable three legs of a stool, then acceptability is like the seat on the stool. You want to trust the legs to be solid, but the seat should also be comfortable—and maybe even beautiful.

The crucial nature of *acceptability* of a translation has long been recognized. And most of Andersen's points can be described under that term, which has the added benefit of emphasizing that it is the receptor audience that judges acceptability.

Now, I would like to look at acceptability from a couple of different angles.

Acceptability and world view

A number of value differences between Western (or industrial) and non-Western cultures have been identified by anthropologists such as Marvin Mayers and Sherwood Lingenfelter (see, e.g., Lingenfelter and Mayers 1988). Some of these are relevant for the acceptability and use of a translation.

One major value difference has to do with declarative versus interrogative. Some educational systems train people to ask questions of everything. Students are taught to evaluate what they hear and not accept something just because an authority figure has said it. Although they respect and listen to experts, people trained to think like this are more likely to dismiss the expert than change their view if they don't agree. Other educational systems are just the opposite. They put a lot of emphasis on what authority figures say. Within these systems children are taught to obey authorities whether they like it or not. What the elders say carries weight, partly because they *are* the recognized elders.

Interrogative people find it easier to accept new ideas. They will evaluate a new translation based on its own merits more than on what authority figures say. Declarative people, on the other hand, find it difficult to accept new ideas that break with tradition or do not conform to what authority figures say. Conservative Christians tend to be declarative, accepting mainly what they have been told by their authority figures. This is especially the case if the society as a whole is also primarily declarative. Conservative, declarative Christians can be a stumbling block for a community's acceptance of a meaning-based translation if there is a tradition of literal translations. If the receptor community is heavily influenced by such a tradition, it is very important to initiate and maintain effective dialogue with the Christian leaders in order to secure their acceptance of the translation.

Another value difference is between "prestige achieved" and "prestige ascribed." In some societies, a person has to earn respect and prestige through hard work, professional excellence, and/or academic study. In others, a person is respected because of his age, title, position, or status in the society, even if he has done nothing to earn that status except being born into the right family or having connections to the right people.

The first missionaries in such a society would have a high level of prestige in the churches they established. What the missionaries said and did would be taken as authoritative. When local church leaders would take over from the missionaries, they would often be even more prestige oriented. They would expect all lay people to obey whatever they said since they were the bishops or leaders with the highest authority. Leaders in a prestige-ascribing society, whether Christian or not, generally do not expect their decisions to be challenged or questioned. If they *are* challenged, they are likely to seek to get rid of the troublesome people who dare to do this.

These value differences are extremely relevant to the acceptability of a Bible translation. The first generations of missionaries used either the King James Version or a similar, very literal version in another major language. They did not have a choice. Therefore, the first indigenous leaders believed that a literal version was and is the authoritative one. Being declarative as well as status oriented, it is hard for many of them to question what they were first introduced to. Even though most missionaries today have abandoned the KJV, there are still those in various Bible schools that teach young Christian leaders that the KJV (or its modern equivalents: the New KJV or the KJV2000[1]) is the best, most

[1] The KJV2000 (copyright ©2000 by the Bible League) intends to preserve the KJV "as is" except for truly necessary changes. The motive for its production was to help those who have memorized from the

accurate, and most authoritative translation in existence. If the young Christians who are taught this are declarative in their orientation and believe what they are taught, the new Bible translations sponsored by SIL or UBS will face opposition. It will take a lot of patience and dialogue to win them over.

Acceptability and training

When we produced the first little booklet in Sabaot containing some traditional and real-life stories, the writing system was not initially accepted. We had earlier organized two big orthography workshops in which the local leaders and educators had expressed their views and we had agreed on the letters to be used in the alphabet. The leaders had also agreed on which of the two major dialects to use for writing purposes. But not all leaders had had an opportunity to attend those workshops. Some, including the leading local politician, got hold of the booklet without having received any instruction about the new writing system. They rejected the writing system because it differed from what they had expected. They were all well-educated and knew how to write in English and Swahili, the national language. Therefore, they expected the same writing system to be used, the one they were familiar with. While we had made great efforts to deviate as little as possible from the writing system of the national language, Sabaot has four times as many vowels and only half the number of consonants, plus an intricate tonal system, and we had had to make some adjustments. The major stumbling block was that we used double letters to indicate long vowels, because vowel length carries a very heavy functional load in Sabaot. (In Swahili vowel length is sub phonemic, and the marking of long vowels in English is obscure.)

I remember vividly one government officer who said that these books had to be stopped. They should never be used. But after I spent only five minutes with him explaining by use of minimal pairs the reason for these double vowels, he turned around completely and accepted that this way of writing was not only correct but also necessary.

To further train other such leaders we produced a booklet that explained the basic linguistic facts of the Sabaot language and the reason for making the writing system the way it is. We sent a copy to the local politician. He must have read it, because when we invited him to officiate over the dedication of the first Bible portion a couple of years later, he was full of praise for the writing system. He acknowledged that he had had difficulty reading Sabaot in the beginning, but he persevered. After having read the Book of Mark three times, he said he now felt he was a competent and fluent reader and was overjoyed and proud of being able to read his own language. He urged everybody else to accept both the writing system and the Bible portion that was now available.

I am giving this example to show that initial rejection can be, and often is, caused by wrong assumptions and lack of training. In our annual workshops mentioned earlier, we have seen how only three weeks of initial training in translation principles can radically change the views and assumptions of new Bible translators. As a result, we now encourage local reviewers to attend the basic training as well. In addition, we arrange many local shorter training courses for the many who cannot attend an expensive three-week course in the capital city. I believe that such courses are not an option, but a necessity, if we want our translations to be used and accepted.

KJV not to lose their long hours of work. It is even closer to the KJV than the New KJV and is produced by those who believe that literalness implies trustworthiness and truthfulness.

The basic principles of meaning-based translation are not difficult to grasp or accept, but they are quite different from the translation principles most people have been exposed to during their school education and life experience. The people I have met tend to focus almost exclusively on the word level. The reviewers, for example, enjoy discussing words for hours, but they don't have the training or experience to articulate translation principles that apply above the word level. They may have a feeling that a literal translation is unnatural, but cannot say why. They only say that it sounds strange.

Because of this focus on the word level, it is natural to think of phrases and sentences as composed of words, which of course they are. But the crucial point to understand in translation is that there is rarely a one-to-one correspondence between "equivalent" words in two different languages. That is why people need to be taught that the same word in one language often has to be translated by different words in another language, *depending on context.* This is a new idea to the uninitiated.

Another important point for people to realize is that a word-for-word translation often does not communicate the correct meaning. This can be taught powerfully by focusing on idioms and how to translate them. Of course, professional translators are well aware that translating idioms literally will often result in a complete loss of meaning. The other day I watched an American film with the Danish translation written as subtitles. One person was commenting on a car and said, "It's running great!" A literal translation into Danish would have been "*Den løber fremragende.*" But that would have been pretty meaningless—in Danish cars and engines don't run. So, it was correctly translated by an idiom: *"Den spinder som en kat,"* which literally in English is "It purrs like a cat." Very different words, but the meaning is carried over eminently well. No one would accuse this translator of being unfaithful to the text. On the other hand, if he had given the literal rendering, he would probably have lost his job!

A third point that people need to understand or be made aware of is the cultural gap between the world of the Bible and the world of the receptor audience. Many *are* aware of this as a cultural and historical fact, but they are not aware of the implications for translation. That is why a training course for local reviewers and church leaders needs to include some teaching on the cultural gap and the concept of implied information. It would be very helpful to teach a basic model of communication theory that includes how to deal with implied information.

In my opinion, it is unfair to ask the local people what kind of alphabet or what kind of Bible translation they would like without *first* teaching them the basic principles for alphabet making and translation. The problem with Bible translation is that most Christians believe they already know what a good-quality translation is. Many of them have been using a Bible in the national language, and they assume that the type of translation used in the national language is not only the right one but the *only* right one. We need to gently enlighten them by showing them through examples that these assumptions, if allowed to control the translation process, would lead to a poor-quality translation.

If there are influential missionaries or church leaders in the area who are not members of the receptor language group, it is important to include them in some kind of similar training, if they are willing to attend. This is often overlooked. In fact, it might be good to encourage them to attend the three-week training course. We haven't done this in Kenya, partly because the course is intended for mother-tongue speakers translating into their own languages, but maybe we should invite them. An alternative and probably better solution would be to arrange a shorter course specifically geared to leaders who are not mother-tongue speakers. In this way we would get less opposition from well-meaning missionaries and influential national or regional church leaders.

Acceptability and compromise

Whether we call the fourth criterion acceptability or authenticity, there will at times be tension between this fourth criterion and the three basic yardsticks we use for a quality translation: naturalness, clarity, and accuracy.

Compromise on naturalness

Naturalness is an important goal for most translators, whether they translate secular or biblical material. It has been said that a good translation does not sound like a translation. However, that does not mean that it cannot be distinguished from a locally authored text, because the subject matter may be foreign. If the text deals with historical events that took place in a different culture, there will obviously be historical references in the text, including names. Those are not altered in normal translation practice.

If the text is pure fiction, the situation is different. I have read secular fiction books translated from English to Danish in which Danish names for people and locations were substituted for English names throughout. This kind of cultural translation is very easy to read and helpful for people who have no knowledge of English and therefore would stumble and be embarrassed by their inability to pronounce these foreign names. Such a translation has a powerful impact. But even in translating fiction nowadays, the foreign names are often retained to show that the story originated in a foreign culture. This is less of a problem in today's globalized world, because many people all over the world have at least been introduced to the English language, even if they don't speak or understand it well.

Bible translation mainly involves historical material, and here we have to keep the foreign names and most of the cultural practices, possibly with some accompanying explanation in footnotes or in other ways. But there is also material in the Bible which is didactic and not historical. When we recently translated the Book of Proverbs into Sabaot, we did some cultural substitution so that the impact on Sabaot readers would be comparable to the impact on the original hearers. In such material the underlying, intended meaning is more important than specific cultural vehicles used to convey that meaning.

To illustrate this point let me give two examples from the translation of the Book of Proverbs.

For Prov. 17:12 the New Living Translation (NLT) has "It is safer to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than to confront a fool caught in folly." The Sabaot people live near the equator, and a bear is absolutely unknown. (There are several words for fools.) The Sabaot translators first made a connection with the ant bear, which they do know, so they suggested using this word to translate 'bear'. We then discussed what the illustration of a bear robbed of its cubs might have communicated to the original audience (huge, wild animal; extreme danger). We then agreed that the illustration of an ant bear would not convey the same meaning. So, we decided instead to use the most ferocious wild animal that the Sabaot people know well and fear, namely the leopard. (Leopards are also known and used as illustrations in the Bible, although not in this particular place.)

For Prov. 14:4 the NIV has "Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest." The Sabaot people use oxen both to plough their fields and pull the harvested maize from the field to the granary, so it was not difficult for them to understand the cultural background, except that they do not use mangers. The Sabaot translation of this verse is back-translated as follows: "The granary of a house, where there are no oxen, is naked/empty. But much is harvested

through the strength of an ox." Whether the Sabaot readers will draw the same conclusions from this illustration as the original readers would have done, remains an open question, because the original intent of the proverb is not very clear. For many modern city dwellers, the cultural background of oxen as work animals is foreign. NLT has translated it as follows: "An empty stable stays clean, but no income comes from an empty stable." Here the translators decided to drop 'oxen' and 'manger' because they are unknown illustrations. They also replaced 'harvest', using the more generic *income* instead. I shall not comment on the success of their rendering. Every translator battles with what to do about culturally unknown illustrations.

In my experience, I have not found much tension between naturalness and acceptability. People generally enjoy hearing a translation that does not sound stilted and unnatural like so many translations they have heard before.

Compromise on clarity

At times there is tension between acceptability and clarity. This is especially the case with the so-called key words of the Bible, because many of these key concepts are foreign and some have traditionally been translated by loan words. However, there may also be problems with loan words used for other concepts. When we did the first edition of Mark's Gospel in Sabaot, we used a loan word for 'fish' (*samaakiit*—borrowed from the national language.) Although the Sabaot people live in a mountain area devoid of fish, most people had heard about or seen fish, either in real life or in pictures, and we used the word which would communicate the idea in the clearest way to most people. But it turned out to be unacceptable, because the Sabaot people wanted a translation as far as possible without loan words. We finally settled for an indigenous word that was less clear (because it was not well known), but more acceptable.

The translators of some English versions have made attempts to clarify key terms by using descriptive phrases rather than loan words, but in the process, they have sometimes produced renderings that I am hesitant to accept. For example, the key words 'prophesy' and 'speak in tongues' in 1 Cor. 12:10 are translated by "speak God's message" and "speak in strange tongues" in the Good News Bible. I consider both of these expressions somewhat inaccurate. The first could be confused with preaching and the second has an unnecessarily negative connotation. (The Contemporary English Version did much better here, as they kept the technical term "prophesy" and, for speaking in tongues, used a neutral rendering: "speak different kinds of languages.") Some technical terms are best kept as such and explained through the context or through church teaching.

If there is an established tradition for the rendering of a key term, it is usually best to keep that rendering for the sake of acceptability, unless there are very strong reasons for revising the term. And if so, such a revision should be agreed to by all denominations if at all possible. (Agreement may not be possible without considerable teaching and dialogue.)

Probably the most serious reason that a translation may be rejected is when more implied information has been made explicit than what the receptor audience considers acceptable. This information is made explicit for the sake of clarity, but it must always be done with a view to maintaining acceptability. It is very important to discuss the acceptable level of explicitness in the translation with the leaders in the receptor audience so that a mutual understanding can be reached. It may not be possible to do this at the outset of the translation program, but it should be a continuing dialogue, with the translation team and

consultants listening and responding to those who will be the primary users and promoters of the translation.

Andersen (1998:11-12) has some good advice on how to limit explicit information in order to keep it at an acceptable level. When I talk about ”acceptability” rather than Andersen’s ”authenticity,” it helps me remember that the acceptability threshold can be significantly raised by training and dialogue. For one new translation, no training program had been set in motion because there was no initial resistance. But when the people later compared their translation with translations in other languages, they were not able to understand why their translation had more explicit information than the more literal versions. Without a good understanding of translation principles and the reasons for explication in a translation it is normal to reject a translation that is more explicit than some other prestigious norm. The explicitness is—perhaps wrongly—interpreted as a lack of accuracy. In other translation programs a clear and fairly explicit translation has been rejected because the all-important dialogue with and training of church leaders did not take place in sufficient degree to ensure acceptability.

Compromise on accuracy

Acceptability and accuracy may also clash, but rarely so, because acceptability is normally based on perceived accuracy. It is more difficult to accept a less accurate translation for the sake of acceptability than it is to compromise in the matter of naturalness and clarity. In many cases both accuracy and clarity are at stake.

Let me give an example from my own experience in the translation of the Sabaot New Testament. We grappled with how to translate ‘baptize’. The Sabaot have a traditional name-giving ceremony for their children, where the relatives gather and call out names of ancestors, while someone tries to balance a small cup of milk on a stick. The name that is called out when the cup balances is the name to be given to the infant, since that particular ancestor was happy with the child. Some people had understood the Christian ceremony of baptizing (infants or adults) as basically a name-giving ceremony, so they suggested using the Sabaot word for giving a name to an infant. We refused that. But if we said ”immerse in water” would the translation be acceptable to Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans? If we said ”sprinkle with water” would it be acceptable to Baptists and Pentecostals? So, we decided to use a loan word *(batisan).* The Greek word has the meaning of immersion as well as being a reference to a religious cleansing ceremony. These aspects of the meaning are not communicated by a loan word. In itself, a loan word communicates zero meaning, but Christians who have heard the corresponding word in the national language will recognize the source of the word and will carry over their understanding of the word from the teaching they have received about baptism. A loan word is never natural or clear, and it does not accurately communicate the original meaning, so the translation lost something in accuracy, naturalness, and clarity at this point. We were willing to pay that price in order to gain acceptability and leave it to the various denominations to interpret the word as they prefer. I should perhaps add that although the Sabaot community much preferred to avoid loan words in their translation of the Bible, they were ready to accept that some of the key terms were translated by loan words, if they could not find a good Sabaot alternative.

Summary

I recommend the term *acceptability* rather than *authenticity* as the fourth criterion for a good translation. Acceptability should be a major concern to translators. In many situations, a modern

translation may initially be rejected because the receptor audience has a different perspective on translation and different views about what a good translation is. To forestall rejection, the translation team, reviewers, and opinion leaders must engage in effective dialogue. It is also the responsibility of the translation team to give basic training in modern translation principles to the receptor audience in order to ensure greater acceptability of the translation.

At times a compromise is needed between acceptability and some of the other criteria for a good translation. It is obviously very important to produce a translation that will be well used, and if that means a slight reduction here and there in naturalness or clarity, then such a compromise is a reasonable price to pay for acceptability. I would be more hesitant to suggest a compromise in accuracy, but there may be cases where the compromise involves some loss both in clarity and in accuracy. Where a loss in accuracy is due to the use of a loan word that does not convey the full meaning of the original term, this could be compensated for by the teaching done by the local Christian leaders or missionaries.

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