Landas 35:2 (2023) 117–141

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF BACK TRANSLATION

Mediating Faithfulness and Naturalness in the Translation of the Bible into an Unfamiliar Tongue

Rhoneil M. Arevalo

Abstract. Translation of the Bible into the mother tongues of peoples requires that it be faithful to the source text while seeing to it that the naturalness of the translation in the receptor language is likewise achieved. These translation ideals may appear complementary on the surface but they produce unintended tensions in the actual translation endeavor. *Faithfulness to the text* requires that the intention of the Biblical author be transferred in the most exact way possible to the target language. *Naturalness of translation* creates the burden of transmitting this authorial intention to the target language in the simplest and least artificial way possible. The faithfulness criterion unwittingly creates a line that instantly separates the translation officer from his/her translators. The officer seeks for the translation to be faithful to the source text while the translators' loyalty is to the receptor language. Naturalness of translation can only be properly assessed by the translators, not by the translation officer. He/she does not speak the receptor language. How, then, can the officer mediate faithfulness and naturalness in the translation of the Bible into an unfamiliar language? Here is where *back translation* is most indispensable. Back translation provides the tool for checking the accuracy of a Bible translation into the mother tongues of peoples.

Keywords. faithfulness; naturalness; theology of translation; translation theories; back translation; Viracnon New Testament project; generic solution

https://publications.lst.edu/

When we talk about the history of the transmission of the Bible in the Philippines, what come to mind are the historical events that paved the way for the entry of the Bible in the Philippines and its eventual use in the worship, study, public reading, and reflection of a faith community. Of course, not far behind the discussion of those significant events are the main characters who played such heroic roles in championing certain Bible causes. Often overlooked are the contributions of nameless faces in the background who labored day and night in the translation of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, into local languages. The transmission of the Bible seems to be initiated and completed by the task of translation. The translation of the sacred texts of the Bible into Philippine languages supplies the "indigenous" expressions for the stories, signs, and symbols expressed therein. It has helped immensely in making the Bible narratives become part of the popular culture.

But how can the translation be assured of its faithfulness to the source text and naturalness in the receptor language when the person assigned to check the translation, the Translation Consultant (TC), does not speak the language or dialect the Bible is to be translated into? Is there a way for them to check the accuracy of the translation?

This article seeks to probe into the usefulness of *back translation*, a tool employed in the checking of a Bible translation into a local language or dialect that is unfamiliar to the TC. Ancillaries to this main topic are a discussion on the theology of translation that illumines the translation ministry of the Philippine Bible Society (PBS) and a presentation of the principles/theories that govern the whole translation process.

Why the Need to Translate? A Theology of Translation

Do we not have sufficient Bible translations out there such that another translation is no longer warranted? When will these translations end? These are the questions usually raised when another

https://publications.lst.edu/

translation project is about to commence. But does translation really have a shelf life? The guiding principles that illumine the translation ministry of the PBS simply do not allow the shutting down of its Translation Department.

Translation as Incarnational

Translation follows the path opened up by God when the Word, which may have been one of God's many attributes, i.e., wisdom, took the form of a human being who lived in a specific location at a specific time. This self-revelation of God in the flesh is understood by Christians as *incarnation*. If God chose to *translate* God's self into the form of a living and historical being in the person of Jesus Christ, it follows then that God wanted and intended to be known unequivocally by God's own people. The "logic" of the incarnation provides the impetus for the translation of God's word as recorded in the Bible into the heart languages of peoples.

A. Walls understands incarnation as the divine activity of translation: "God chose translation as his mode of action for the salvation of humanity."[1] It is interesting to note that in Walls's view of the incarnation, God seems to abandon the usual pattern of divine intervention in human history through the display of God's supernatural powers, such as in the parting of the Red Sea, established firmly in the Old Testament. In the dispensation of the renewed covenant, God works silently in terms of translating what the deity is like before the people through the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ. In fact, this translation initiative of God was so bereft of the wonderful display of divine strength celebrated in the Hebrew Scriptures that the religious establishment based in the Jerusalem Temple refused to accept this "version" of Israel's God. Ironically, it was the ordinary people, the great unwashed of Judea, who embraced God's new self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The incarnation of God became one of

[1]A. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 26.

https://publications.lst.edu/

the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. As Walls triumphantly proclaims, "Christian faith rests in [the] divine act of translation."[2]

Walls reflects on divinity being translated into humanity when God became Christ and Christ became a human being. However, in this process of "divine translation," God became particularized. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, assumed a human race in becoming a Jew; spoke Aramaic, the language of God's very own people; wore clothes befitting a temperate land, and so on and so forth. When Walls speaks about a divinity that was translated into a humanity that was not *generalized* humanity,[3] he may have been hinting about a "particularized" translation of divinity. This particularity has never been more adequately felt or understood as it is in the language of a people.

The language of humanity requires that translation become a continuous human activity if only to duplicate, over and over, the divine act of translation. Walls calls this endeavor the "constant succession of new translations."[4] The Incarnation did not put to an end the task of translating the divine self-revelation into the tongues of humankind. The fact that the Incarnation took place opens up the idea that God wants to be known. The first act of translation should be duplicated with the translation of the testimonies of the ancient peoples about how God's love for the whole world was made known through the ministry, deeds of mercy, radical teachings about love of God and neighbor, and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. These early witnesses spoke in a language, *Koine Greek*, that was known to the ancients but is no longer intelligible to the contemporary world. Walls admits to the intensiveness of translation:

> Translation involves the attempt to express the meaning of the source from the resources of and within the working system of the receptor language.[5]

[2]Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 26.

[3]Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 27.

[4]Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 27.

[5]Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 28.

https://publications.lst.edu/

The varied structures of human language complicate the translation endeavor. For incarnation to be comprehensible, it needs to be expressed in thought forms that make sense to a lay person. This is obviously not easy as certain words or concepts from the source language cannot simply be duplicated or easily reproduced in the target or receptor language. This makes the task difficult but not impossible. The conundrum that existed pre-incarnation was resolved by a God who thought out of the box, so to speak. The creativity with which the deity resolved the problem of separation from God's creation should provide the inspiration for solving this translation dilemma. The result is immense for Bible translation, which:

> aims at releasing the word about Christ so that it can reach all aspects of a specific linguistic and cultural context, so that Christ can live within that context.…[6]

The theology associating translation with incarnation finds a kindred spirit in Lamin Sanneh.

Christianity is a Translated Religion

As long as Christianity continues to be a missionary religion, translation will remain integral to its very existence. The Gospel according to Matthew reveals the sudden change of mission focus of the ancient Church from a purely Jewish standpoint into a universal one. The post-resurrection Church appeared to be breaking out from the confinement of the exclusive mission to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 10:5–6) to extend its missionary reach to include all the nations of the world (28:19). If the Church is to communicate Jesus's commandments (v. 20) to all peoples everywhere, translation must be the first device in its toolbox. Such is the importance of translation to the Church as to move Sanneh to reflect that "translation is the church's birthmark as well as its missionary benchmark."[7]

---

[6]Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 29.

[7]L. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 97.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Translation appears to be already present right at the very beginning of Christianity. Sanneh's birthmark analogy for translation proceeds from his position that Christianity is a translated religion:

> Being the original Scripture of the Christian movement, the New Testament Gospels are a translated version of the message of Jesus, and that means Christianity is a translated religion without a revealed language.[8]

The fact that Christianity started without the benefit of a revealed language proved to be a blessing for the budding religion. A revealed language is understood by Sanneh as "the language or originating culture of its founder."[9] Its absence proved to be a boon rather than a bane for Christianity because it did not provide the followers of the religion the opportunity or occasion to sacralize the language of the founder, diverting significantly from the path later trodden by Islam and the Qur'ān. A religion without a holy language makes it possible for translation to flourish, thereby staying faithful to its *raison d'etre.*

Translation is crucial for the comprehensibility of the Christian message. Sanneh articulates the general rule concerning translation:

> people [having] a right to understand what they were being taught was matched by the view that there was nothing God wanted to say that could not be said in a simple everyday language.[10]

"God speak" was made democratic by translation when the latter prevented the religious elite of the Church in its early days to hijack the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by insisting that the same be expressed in an untranslatable holy language. The Church fathers stayed true to the Great Commission of the risen Christ. Instead of the Gospel becoming esoteric, it was led in the opposite direction. Sanneh points out that Christians became "pioneers of linguistic development with the

[8]Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 97.

[9]Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 98.

[10]Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 98.

https://publications.lst.edu/

creation of alphabets, orthographies, dictionaries, and grammars,"[11] and adds that Christians transmitted the Scripture in native tongues, which was indicative of the high priority they placed on human languages. The distinguishing mark of Scriptural translation, according to Sanneh, has been the effort to come as close as possible to the speech of the common people.[12]

It is but fitting to end this survey with Sanneh's position on translation: "Christian translation work rests on the inclusive principle of the religion of Jesus."[13]

Where, then, is the Bible translation ministry of the PBS to be located in these theological positions on translation?

The Ministry of Bible Translation of the PBS

When people come into contact with the Gospel message for the first time, its power to disturb and stir human imagination about God and God's concern for God's creation proves to be irresistible. The Gospel creates a spiritual hunger that cannot be filled up unless the word of God is made available to people in a language they can fully understand. This fact is ably demonstrated in Anne Kwantes's essay on the Philippine Bible Society.[14]

Kwantes tells of a time during the 19th century when there was a law that forbade the reading or keeping of a Bible. It was also a time ripe for political and social upheaval. She recounts that there were some

[11]Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 99.

[12]L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 192.

[13]Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 201. Here Sanneh is contrasting the openness of Christian translation with the disposition of humanistic culture to resist change.

[14]A. Kwantes, "The Bible Society in the Philippines: The Story of the Bible Society Work," in A. Kwantes, ed., *Chapters in Philippine Church History* (Manila: OMF Literature Inc., 2001), 463–481.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Filipinos who still read the Bible in secret even with the existence of such a repressive law and that this did not stop merely at private reading.

> Some who owned Bibles and who knew Spanish would gather family members and neighbors together in the evening, reading aloud by candlelight and translating into the local language while the assembled people listened.[15]

Translation of the Bible was already afoot even when there was still no Bible Society to handle such a task in the Philippines. Kwantes's story simply demonstrates the fact that there exists a need to translate the Scriptures into the mother tongues of peoples. And attempts there were! The first on Kwantes's list was the translation initiative undertaken by a Spanish Dominican missionary-priest who went by the name of Fr. Nicolas Manrique Alonso y Lallave (1839–1889). Kwantes writes,

> There in Spain, Lallave began to translate Bible portions, out of a concern for the people he had left behind in the Philippines. His first translation project was completed in 1873, the Gospel of Luke in Panggalatok. Eventually he translated most of the New Testament.[16]

There is no need to rehash the details of the history of Bible translation in the Philippines as there are other volumes already out there that adequately and exhaustively discuss the topic. The concern of the present writer is to place the ministry of the Philippine Bible Society in the "theological continuum" discussed earlier. PBS sees its mission as that of

> an inter-faith, non-profit, non-stock organization whose purpose is to promote the widest possible effective distribution of the Holy Scriptures in languages people can understand and at prices affordable to most.[17]

While the translation philosophy/theology of PBS is obscured in this mission statement—as the stress is laid on the distribution and marketing of the Bible—the clause "in languages people can

[15]Kwantes, "The Bible Society in the Philippines," 464.

[16]Kwantes, "The Bible Society in the Philippines," 465.

[17]Kwantes, "The Bible Society in the Philippines," 481.

https://publications.lst.edu/

understand" reveals much about the highest priority given to translation by the Bible Society. The theological perspectives of *incarnationality* and *translatableness* are evident in the translation works of the PBS, and its translation theology is nowhere more pronounced than in its recent project—a translation of the New Testament into the Viracnon dialect.

The New Testament translation into the Viracnon language in Bikol, Southern Catanduanes is the result of the cooperative effort by the five Bible translation agencies in the Philippines that sought to identify the languages into which the Bible had not yet been translated. These translation agencies coalesced into a group bonded by a common purpose and which later adopted the name *Tambuli Fellowship*. In a consultative meeting that gathered together these translation agencies (of which PBS is one), it was revealed that there are still 45 languages that do not benefit from any Bible translation. Of these 45 languages, 8 were assigned to PBS, all of which were languages of the Bikol region. After several meetings, it was decided that among the languages assigned to PBS, Viracnon would serve as the pilot for the translation of the New Testament.

From March 25–29, 2019, a PBS team went to Catanduanes and conducted a sociolinguistic survey as there were limited studies on the languages spoken on the island. Two months later, PBS held the Bikol Southern Catanduanes (Viracnon) New Testament Translation Workshop from May 21–24 in Virac, Catanduanes where translators were chosen from among the workshop participants. A Reviewers' Workshop, which ran from August 6–9, was then organized to train potential reviewers of the translation drafts of a New Testament book, i.e., The Gospel of Mark, in Viracnon.

Initial translation drafts passed through several stages of review. Early drafts were reviewed internally by peers and then by the Translation Consultant during the Committee Review stage. The internally reviewed drafts were then sent to external reviewers who were selected from the participants of the Reviewers' Workshop. Decisions were then made on whether to accept the recommendations of the external reviewers or retain the translations as they were. This last stage of decision-making constituted the Final Draft stage. The final

https://publications.lst.edu/

drafts of select Viracnon NT translations were then read publicly to representatives of the community last August 30, 2021. The community response to the Viracnon translations was very encouraging.

What are the guardrails that ensure the faithfulness and naturalness of a translation? The answers to these questions will be provided by the translation theories that inform and illumine the translation work of PBS.

Navigating Between Faithfulness and Naturaless: Tensions in Translation

Every translation project of the PBS seeks to achieve both faithfulness to the source text and naturalness of translation in the receptor language. These translation goals, while overarching in reach, are also in perpetual tension with each other. This tension will be the focus of this section.

The Composition of the Translation Team

A translation team is composed of the Translation Consultant and the translators—usually three in number—who are chosen from representatives recommended and sent by the Roman Catholic Church, mainline Protestant churches, Christian faith communities, fellowships, and parachurches. For the Viracnon project, translators were chosen from a pool of participants at the translation workshop hosted by PBS. During the workshop, prospective translators were introduced to translation principles and procedures observed by PBS. In this set-up, the gatekeeper of faithfulness to the source text is the TC who, by virtue of their post-graduate training in Biblical studies and/or linguistics, is assumed to be adept in the Biblical languages of Hebrew and NT Greek and possess a more than adequate knowledge of the Old and New Testament books in their historical, literary, and theological contexts. The aspect of naturalness is expected to be provided by the translators, who are native speakers of the language or dialect of the target audience or culture. This compositional make-up

of the translation team is influenced by the translation theory adhered to by PBS, the dynamic equivalence theory.

The Dynamic Equivalence Theory

The dynamic equivalence theory (DE) is a translation theory that was first developed by Eugene Nida in the 1960s. As the name suggests, DE views translation as the transfer of meaning from the source language into the receptor language. M. Larson provides a simple description of the translation process involved in the DE:

> This is done by going from the form of the first language to the form of a second language by way of semantic structure. It is meaning which is being transferred and must be held constant. Only the form changes.[18]

The DE proceeds from Nida's observation that the difficulties in translation are due to the wrong assumptions held by many about the source and receptor languages. He insists that to achieve the "goal of equivalent response," there needs to be a change in the translator's perspective of the languages in which they are working.[19] The change that Nida suggests requires the de-sacralization of the source language and a "radical rethinking of one's attitude toward the receptor language."[20] Nida's position emanates from his belief that "anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message."[21] While he admits that a perfect match between languages does not exist, the translator is confronted with the choice of what in the source language is to be retained or sacrificed. For Nida, the form of the source language can be changed but the meaning must be allowed to remain intact. Therefore,

---

[18]M. Larson, *Meaning-Based Translation: A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 3.

[19]E. Nida & C. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: United Bible Societies, 1969), 3.

[20]Nida & Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 3.

[21]Nida & Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 4.

https://publications.lst.edu/

a good translation for Dynamic Equivalence is a translation that must communicate the meaning of the original message.[22]

Cardinal to the DE is the specific procedure that it prescribes, in which the source-text elements like grammar, connotations, and meaning are reduced to or analyzed as linguistic kernel that can be transferred and restructured to form target surface elements.[23] The procedure is a three-step protocol:

1. *Break the source form into a kernel sentence*. This requires an analysis of the passage from the source text (the form) by breaking it down into smaller part(s) known as the kernel.

2. *Restructure the form*. Now that the form is reduced into smaller part(s), it is easier to extract the meaning from the form. Once the meaning is extracted, the form can now be restructured into new "forms" that provide the most meaning in the receptor language.

3. *Transfer the meaning to the receptor language*. Translation happens when the meaning of the form is communicated in the receptor language.

The DE does not remain unchallenged. Later translation theories question the assumptions of the DE.

The Debate

Later translation theories find fault in the translation assumptions of Eugene Nida in the DE. One translation theory argues that translation is "not a purely linguistic operation, but rather a way of

[22]K. Barnwell, *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course in Translation Principles*, 3rd ed. (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1986), 8.

[23]C. Nord, "Functional Approaches to Translation," in C. Chapelle, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 1–4.

https://publications.lst.edu/

facilitating communication between members of different cultures."[24] Out of this concern thus emerged *skopostheorie* or functionalism. *Skopos*, the shorter name of the theory, stands on the principle first laid down by its proponent, the German linguist Hans Vermeer, in the late 1970s, which says that "the purpose of translation determines the choice of translation method and strategy."[25] C. Nord calls it the functionality principle.[26] In *Bridging the Cultural Gap*, she notes that functionalism is based on the fundamental hypothesis that language, while certainly a part of culture, is not the only vehicle of communicative intentions between peoples and cultures. There is, in Nord's estimation, the existence of the cultural gap which makes it impossible to realize the hopes of DE in the actual translation process.

What situations bring about this intense feeling of a cultural gap? Nord is quick to point out the following:[27]

1. *The lack of culture-specific background knowledge*. This arises when what is said about a certain culture does not tally with the translator's knowledge.

2. *The mismatch between non-verbal and verbal behavior*. This takes place when translators fail to make sense of or correctly interpret the non-verbal behavior of the target culture.

Nord takes a direct swipe at the DE's prioritization of the source text. *Skopos* theory, according to Nord, "no longer considers the source text, or more precisely, its linguistic and stylistic features, to be a valid

[24]C. Nord, "Bridging the Cultural Gap: Bible Translation as a Case in Point," *Acta Theologica* 22:1 (2002): 98–116, here at 1–16.

[25]C. Nord, "Function Plus Loyalty: Ethics in Professional Translation," *Génesis: Revista Cientifica do ISAG* (2007), 1.

[26]Nord, "Function Plus Loyalty," 1.

[27]Nord, "Bridging the Cultural Gap," 116.

https://publications.lst.edu/

yardstick for translation."[28] The translator assumes a more pro-active role in *skopos* where she or he now acts as a "responsible mediator developing between [sic] the client, the target audience and the source text-author."[29] The translator is responsible for seeing to it that loyalty to the translation partners is not violated in the translation endeavor. Here loyalty

> means that the translator has to anticipate any misunderstanding or communicative conflict that may occur due to different translational concepts and find a way to avoid them.[30]

This commitment to loyalty is supreme in *skopos* because it presupposes that translation "takes place in specific situations set in specific cultures."[31] L. de Vries, a Dutch linguist, has a different take on *skopos*'s loyalty. His definition of loyalty, to a certain extent, approaches Nida's faithfulness to the text:

> The functional goals of a translation project strongly determine how Bible translators deal with intercultural mediation. However, loyalty to the ancient writers and redactors of the biblical text should keep translators from crossing the red line … translators should never rewrite the biblical texts in ways that violate consensus views of biblical scholarship.…[32]

De Vries's strict definition of loyalty appears to be a check on the unintended tendency to domesticate or tame the Bible, something which DE might have engendered due to its insistence on equivalence and naturalness in the transference of meaning from the source to the target language. Nord seconds de Vries by saying that equivalence is

[28]Nord, "Function Plus Loyalty," 1.

[29]Nord, "Function Plus Loyalty," 2.

[30]Nord, "Function Plus Loyalty," 2.

[31]Nord, "Function Plus Loyalty," 2.

[32]L. de Vries, "Bible Translation and Culture: The Theory and Practice of Intercultural Mediation in the Translation of John 2.1–12," *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 10:41 (2017): 247–280.

https://publications.lst.edu/

obsolete as a standard of translation quality and proposes adequacy as the alternative norm. Adequacy takes place when the translation is adequate or fulfills the requirements of the translation brief.[33] A translation brief is a detailed plan that indicates the intended goals or functions that the translation endeavor wishes to accomplish.

To mitigate the translation problems wrought by DE, Nord proposes that the translation team make the decision outright on which audience the translation wishes to address and the purpose that it seeks to fulfill for them.[34] Nord calls these two *skopos* priorities functional categories[35] that must be reflected in the translation brief.

There is another theory that takes aim at DE. S. Pattemore, a staunch practitioner of the relevance theory (RT), criticizes DE in that it tends to minimize the source text in its quest for equivalence of meaning:

> By seeking to look behind the text, to a truly inaccessible place, Nida's theory looses [sic] sight of the very thing which contains the web of meaning, namely the text itself.[36]

The RT's thesis is built on the assumption that human communication crucially creates an expectation of *optimal relevance*—the expectation on the part of the hearer that her or his attempt at translation will yield adequate contextual effects with minimal processing cost.[37] In other words, RT assumes that the target audience will not want to exert much effort (the "processing effort," according

[33]Nord, "Functional Approaches to Translation," 1–4.

[34]Nord, "Bridging the Cultural Gap," 116.

[35]Nord, "Functional Approaches to Translation," 1–4.

[36]S. Pattemore, "Framing Nida: The Relevance of Translation Theory in the United Bible Societies," in P. Noss, ed., *History of Bible Translation* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007).

[37]A. Mojola & E. Wendland, "Scripture Translation in the Era of Translation Studies," in T. Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* (London: Routledge, 2002).

https://publications.lst.edu/

to RT) in interpreting the translated text. Mojola and Wendland explain further that readers will want to pay the lowest possible price in this regard, and so a raise in cognitive costs will correlate with a drop in interest in a translated book.

H. Hill describes RT as the feeling of making sense in the communication process, that is, the experience of cognitive effects.[38] Hill explains that these cognitive effects are the changes in what we know—the more cognitive effects there are, the more relevance there is. The relevance theory works this way:[39]

1. Take the path of least effort.
2. Search for meaning until one gets enough cognitive effects to satisfy one's expectations.
3. Assume one has arrived at the intended meaning and stop processing.

These contending points were kept in full view as the actual translation of the New Testament into Viracnon commenced. But how can the translation priorities of faithfulness/loyalty and naturalness/adequacy be navigated peacefully in this translation project? This is where back translation (BT) comes in.

The Indispensability of Back Translation

Attempting to achieve both *faithfulness* to the source text and *naturalness* of translation in the receptor language inevitably creates some form of tension in the translation task. This tension is never felt more than in the task of the Translation Consultant. The TC, by virtue of their training and responsibility in the translation endeavor, bears the burden of balancing these two complementary yet somewhat opposing values. In an actual translation project, the TC might approach

[38]H. Hill, "Relevant Study Bibles," *The Bible Translator* 61:4 (October 2010): 192.

[39]Hill, "Relevant Study Bibles," 193.

https://publications.lst.edu/

the task at first with a bias toward faithfulness to the source text and may not be mindful of naturalness as she or he is not a native speaker of the receptor language. To counter this unevenness, the translators chosen for the project, who are native speakers of the target language, provide the check for naturalness. But if the TC is a stranger to the receptor culture and language, how can she or he make sense of the translation? How can the TC know if the translators understand the passages they are translating? How can she or he keep abreast of the translation and its faithfulness to the source text? Back translation provides just the tool for carrying out this verification.

Back Translation as a Translation Check Tool

Back translation is defined as an assessment tool used in international and cross-cultural social research.[40] The import of back translation, says S. Tyupa, is that it sheds light on how conceptualization operated in the translator's and back translator's minds and so helps in making some inferences regarding the comparability of source and target versions of a text. BT thus functions as an auxiliary process of clarifying the meaning (i.e., conceptualization) of the items in the source and target languages.[41]

In Bible translation, BT is used as a method or tool for checking the drafts in a language that is foreign to the TC.[42] This requires the translators to translate the drafts into an international or national language known to the TC (in the Viracnon project's case, Tagalog). While the BT is not expected to give a very accurate translation of the draft, it is expected to play two key functions in the translation process, namely, to provide insight into the level of understanding the

[40]S. Tyupa, "A Theoretical Framework for Back-Translation as a Quality Assessment Tool," *New Voices in Translation Studies* 7 (2011): 36.

[41]Tyupa, "A Theoretical Framework for Back-Translation as a Quality Assessment Tool," 38.

[42]Personal communication of author dated September 16, 2021, with a United Bible Societies Manual for Translation Officer.

https://publications.lst.edu/

translators have of the source text and a method for the TC to evaluate fairly the accuracy of this knowledge.

To ensure the accuracy of the BT, the drafters of the text are not allowed to back translate their own translation outputs. Ideally, the BT should be done by outsiders, i.e., individuals who are not part of the team; however, in actual work, the translators take the works of their own colleagues. The translation draft, together with its corresponding BT, is prepared by the translators ahead of the meeting with the TC.

The Viracnon NT Translation Project

The theoretical framework provided by the dynamic equivalence theory is the overall translation principle that governs all PBS translation projects. The DE expects the end-product of every translation endeavor to be *faithful* to the source text while maintaining the *naturalness* of the translation in the receptor language. However, this is somewhat of a pipe dream—aside from the debate surrounding the DE's theoretical assumptions already discussed elsewhere in this paper, there is also a tension that exists in the faithfulness requirement of the DE. The TC's fidelity is to the source text while that of the translators is to the receptor language (in this case, the Viracnon dialect). In this clash of perspectives, what is the middle ground?

This tension does not weigh as much on the translators as it does on the TC. To produce the best translation result, the TC and the translation project must harness the wisdom and practicability offered by the other translation principles. The *skopos* principle insists on the functionality of the translation project; hence, the Viracnon NT project needed to spell outright its specific translation goal, which was to produce a NT translation for an audience within the age range of 18–40 years old and who spoke the Viracnon dialect. Foremost among the many considerations for translation was the fact that the Bible (or parts of it) had not yet been translated into this dialect. During the initial language research, other sectors expressed their desire to produce literary materials in the mother tongue (Viracnon) instead of perpetually relying on materials originating from the Bicol mainland, particularly from Naga City. Corollary to this was the expressed

https://publications.lst.edu/

need to develop an orthography for Viracnon. These aims were thus incorporated into the project's primary goal.

The intelligibility and acceptability of the translation for the target audience must also take into account the proposals of the relevance theory, which insists that the translation must not be a "hard reading" but rather one that can be easily understood.

Back Translation at Work in the Viracnon NT Project

Back translation provides the tool that checks the "accuracy" of the translation drafts. In this section, the dynamics of BT will be demonstrated through some concrete translation examples.

Most of the difficulties in translation that the Viracnon team confronted emanated from Paul's letters. This is because Paul employs concepts more dynamically than his counterparts do in the New Testament. Because of the breadth of Paul's theological vision, he attaches more than one meaning to a certain word. The dynamism of Paul's theological thought is revealed, for example, in concepts such as *grace* and *faith*.

Grace is often understood in the NT to mean God's rich blessings or favor, as in Acts 4:33 and 6:8, among others, or kind love, as in John 1:14. In Paul, *grace* seems to refer to several things, such as God's special gift to someone (Rom. 1:5; 1 Cor. 3:10; Gal. 2:9), that God supplies all that is necessary so that humankind is put right before God (Rom. 3:24), or God's free gift (Rom. 4:16). This proves to be problematic in the translation of this theological concept into Viracnon. Which of these senses is the appropriate one?

Take, for example, Rom. 1:7. The source text says

> πᾶσιν τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ῥώμῃ ἀγαπητοῖς θεοῦ, κλητοῖς ἁγίοις, χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ
>
> All to the ones (who) are in Rome, beloved ones of God, to the ones who were called holy ones, grace to you and peace from

https://publications.lst.edu/

θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

God, Father of us and of the Lord Jesus Christ. (author's translation)

χάρις or grace is understood here to mean God's undeserved love and mercy that God showers on all people. Most translations except for Today's English Version (TEV) translate this word as "grace"; the latter understands grace as "God's love." The Tagalog standard translations employ *pagpapala* for grace. Viracnon translates the same in this way:

> Sa sainyo gabos na asa Roma, mga namot-an ning Dios buda inapod tanganing maging banal, mapasainyo ang *biyaya* buda katuninongan hari sa Dios na satuyang Ama buda sa Kagurangnang Jesu-Cristo.

Back translation tracks the draft in this manner:

> Sa lahat na nasa Roma, mga minamahal ng Dios at tinawag para maging banal, sumainyo ang *biyaya* at kapayapaan galing sa Dios na ating Ama at sa Panginoong Jesu-Cristo.

The TC suspected that *biyaya* here is a Tagalog loan word because the translators used *bendisyon* elsewhere to refer to the same. In 2 Cor. 1:15, χάρις or grace is understood to mean benefit, joy, or pleasure. English translations vary—pleasure for the RSV, favor for the NRSV, and blessed/blessing for the GNT/CEV. Viracnon understands the passage in this way:

> Ta sigurado ako sa gabos na ini, kaya nagplano ako na inot akong maagi diyan sainyo tanganing magkaigwa kamo ning dobleng *bendisyon*.

Back translation renders the following:

> Sigurado ako sa lahat na ito, kaya nagplano ako na una akong dadaan diyan sa inyo upang magkaroon kayo ng dobleng *biyaya*.

The TC inquired about the reason for the discrepancy in both translations. The translator concerned reasoned out that *biyaya* is indeed Tagalog and is frequently used to refer to a wide range of meaning, from material gifts to God's manifestation of God's grace. *Bendisyon,* on the other hand, is understood to be an act of blessing someone by putting a hand on their head or actions performed in a rite that employed holy water in the blessing of the people. The translator understood χάρις in 2 Cor. 1:15 in this manner.

https://publications.lst.edu/

In Rom. 3:24, *grace* is more than *biyaya* or *bendisyon*. In Paul's mind, *grace* is closely related to God's justification of sinners. Because of God's righteousness, God is able to put sinful humans in a right relationship with God's self. Here is how the Viracnon translators showed this expressed sense of grace in this passage:

> Pero dahilan sa sainyang *karinasang-boot* (*biyaya*) na daing bayad niyang pigtao, pigturing sinda na matanos sa paagi ni Cristo Jesus na siyang gapalaya sainda.

Back translation informs the TC on how the translator understood this verse:

> Pero dahil sa kanyang *mabuting loob* na walang bayad niyang binigay, tinuring sila na matuwid sa pamamagitan ni Cristo Jesus na siyang nagpapalaya sakanila.

The translator initially chose *biyaya* to express the sense of grace here. But the TC informed the translator that *biyaya* does not capture the depth of Paul's understanding of χάρις. Paul sees in it God's "reconciling initiative" through God's righteousness that puts sinful human beings in a right relationship with God. The Greek phrase δικαιούμενοι δωρεάν, lit. being made right/justified freely, describes what grace is all about—God justifying the ungodly. The TC pointed out to the translator the attempt of the Tagalog translations to capture this deeper meaning of grace by translating the same as *kagandahang-loob ng Diyos*. The translator had chosen to follow the Tagalog example in *karinasang-boot*.

The word *faith* (Gk. πιστις) is understood differently by Paul. For most NT writers, e.g., James, Peter, John, and the authors of the Pastorals, *faith* is belief in or subscription to the Church's doctrines or may refer to the faith of the Church. Paul uses faith in a different sense; for him, *faith* is faith in Jesus Christ and so refers to the quality of that faith, that is, having complete trust in and obedience to the Lord. Rom. 3:22 captures this very well:

> Pigagibong matanos ning Dios ang gabos sa paagi ning saindang *pagtubod (pagsarig)* ki Jesu-Cristo.

Back translation renders it thus:

https://publications.lst.edu/

> Ginagawang matuwid ng Dios ang lahat sa pamamagitan ng kanilang *paniniwala* kay Jesu-Cristo.

Viracnon has two words for "to have faith," namely, *tubod*, to believe, and *sarig*, to trust or to have confidence in someone. The TC called the attention of the translator to the choice of *tubod* in translating faith in this verse. The TC explained to the translator the nuances of the word *faith* in Paul's theological scheme. The translator was convinced of the explanation and decided to change *pagtubod* into *pagsarig* to represent properly Paul's perspective on faith in Viracnon.

However, the external reviewers and the community made a big issue about the team's decision to employ *karinasang-boot* and *pagsarig* in translating Paul's distinctive theological expressions. According to them, there is no Viracnon word or concept that corresponds to *karinasang-boot*. They argued that this is obviously a "Tagalog intrusion" into Viracnon. In the case of *pagsarig*, the community agreed that *pagtubod* is more readily understandable and more commonly used. In cases like this, what must the team do to avoid a ruckus and court losing the community's support for the translation project?

The Generic Solution

The benefit of allowing translation principles to guide a translation project is that they provide mechanisms that present helpful options when problems arise. For instance, dynamic equivalence insists that faithfulness and naturalness are achieved when the meaning of the source text is transferred to the target language. The *skopos*'s concept of loyalty, on the other hand, requires that the translator maintain the equilibrium among the different interest groups in the translation project, namely, the client (in this case, PBS), the target audience, and the source text. It further tasks the translator to find ways to avert what Nord calls "the communicative conflict." Relevance theory, on the other hand, requires that the translation produce more cognitive effects and so be easy to read and understand.

While these translation principles contradict each other in the modalities that they propose and in their theoretical assumptions,

https://publications.lst.edu/

they intersect in the priority that they place on the meaningfulness or intelligibility of translation. S. MacLochlainn proposes a way to lessen the tension between faithfulness to the source text and meaningfulness of translation in the target language. He suggests the use of what he calls *generic terms*.

MacLochlainn seems to suggest that the *generic*[43] is a broad-brush concept employed by native speakers in their everyday communication which can accommodate both the general and the specific ideas about a thing or concept. For example, *gulay* generally refers to any vegetable that the speaker may have in mind at the moment. But *gulay* may also mean an *okra*, a *repolyo*, or a *talong*. Another example is when someone is asked where they are going—they are likely to say *doon* (lit., there), which could mean a marketplace, the streetcorner, or a store. The capacity of the generic to allow or permit a particular aspect of the concept to surface is what makes it very useful in Bible translation.

The final product of the DE's restructuring of the source form to find its equivalence in the target language may be characterized primarily as *generic*. This was the route taken by the Viracnon team to find a consensus regarding the translation problems referred to earlier. In the case of *pagtubod* representing Paul's concept of a dynamic faith, the team convened to discuss the pros and cons of the term. The translators informed the TC that while *tubod* has the primary meaning of belief, it also captures the element of trust and confidence that Paul's conception of faith requires. The team thus decided to use *pagtubod* in the translation of *faith* in Paul's letters for two reasons, namely, 1) its common usage and 2) both the universality and specificity that the concept requires are present in this Viracnon word.

However, in the case of *karinasang-boot*, the community insisted on the foreignness of this compound word and suggested that the word *biyaya* be used instead. The translators explained, however, that this generic term is denotationally ambivalent and that it leans more, in its current usage, toward a material kind of blessing. According to the

[43]S. MacLochlainn, "Divinely Generic: Bible Translation and the Semiotics of Circulation," *Signs and Society* 3:2 (2015): 253–254.

https://publications.lst.edu/

translators, this was not what St. Paul had in mind when he used the term in the passage in question. They asked for suggestions on what they could use to replace *karinasang-boot*. When the community could not arrive at one, the team decided to retain *karinasang-boot*.

Such matters regarding faithfulness/loyalty to the source text and the naturalness/adequacy of the Viracnon translation could not have been addressed without the immense assistance of *back translation*.

An Evaluation of the Back Translation of the Viracnon New Testament Project

Translation is not simply the transferring of the source form into the receptor language and then hoping that it makes sense there. It involves the complex task of maintaining a balance between faithfulness to the source text and naturalness in the target language. The person responsible for maintaining that balance is assisted immensely by a translation check tool provided by back translation. To recap:

1. The translation goals of preserving *faithfulness* to the source text and achieving *naturalness* of the translation in the receptor language must be preserved at all times and, therefore, are non-negotiable.
2. The Translation Consultant, the person in charge of assessing the quality of the translation, is able to follow the translation task through back translation.
3. Back translation helps the TC gauge the translators' understanding of the passages being translated.
4. Back translation assists the TC in finding "discrepancies in translator understanding" and so informs the translators of the corrective steps that need to be taken.
5. In cases of non-consensus in some translation issues among the translation partners, the "generic" approach

https://publications.lst.edu/

is to be taken without sacrificing faithfulness and naturalness of translation.

About the Author. **Rhoneil M. Arevalo, PhD** earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree from the Philippine Christian University in 2009. His field of interest is in the exegesis of Hebrew and Greek texts and their implications in translation. He is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church and is currently seconded to the Philippine Bible Society as a Translation Consultant.





https://publications.lst.edu/