

THE ENGLISH BIBLE AND THE FEMINIST DISCOURSE: RE-EXAMINING SOME TRANSLATIONAL MATTERS

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Abstract

The Bible has been translated into many languages, including what may be referred to as minority languages. In fact, there is no literary piece that has recorded the number of translations as the Bible. Translators, using different approaches, have produced many versions of the English Bible. The English translations of the Bible, like all translated works stick to the rules of the English language. For example, the nouns and pronouns of the English language are always specific in identifying the specific gender of referents. This implies that, unlike some languages, English is gender-based. Some linguists and theologians, therefore, view the English Bible as a patriarchal text, which has given prominence to males, especially in issues that are extremely important and that the females are either not mentioned at all or hinted only when the minutest details are being discussed. Contrarily, this study attempts to show that the English Bible, especially some 21st century versions have given significant recognition to the matriarchy and femininity.

Keywords: English Bible, Translation, Speech Acts, Feminism, Gender Sense

Introduction

Biblical translators like all other types of translators are interpreters; they create meanings from the source language(s) to the target language(s). The original manuscripts that are

today referred to as the Bible were basically written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. It is plausible that as a result of the processes of translation and the variegated linguistic structures of the target and source languages, the status of women (and sometimes children) seems to have been left derelict.

On the genealogy of the English Bible, Clendence, E.R. and Strabnow, D. K. (2012:43) posits that:

the various biblical books began as manuscripts of some kind, which were copied some more, and eventually ended up as the well-defined set known as the Hebrew scriptures (though a few parts are actually in the related language of Aramaic), and later the equally well-defined set known as the Greek New Testament (versus the Hebrew scriptures, which came to be known as the Old Testament

The authors of the synoptic gospels, according to Nickle, K. (1980), “drew heavily on the fund of anecdote, about Jesus which had been preserved in oral traditions”. The synoptic gospels constitute the first three Gospels of the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke. They display a high degree of sameness in content, narrative arrangement, language and structure both in sentence and passage, including their parables. These gospels are also considered by biblical scholars to share the same point of view.

The Bible, as noted above was originally written in Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew which came as different manuscripts. Subsequently, the Bible was translated into other languages and eventually, English. The aim of a translation is usually to create a text in another language that is basically

the same style as the original one. However, the different structures of languages make this a herculean task and almost impossible to produce the exact translations. This leads to differences in the meanings and arrangements of the diction of the various versions of the Bible.

The English Bible has different versions. Each of versions passed through various processes in order to be translated into English and other languages. It is not an overstatement that there is no other text that has enjoyed the number of translations as the Bible. Apart from the fact that different translations of the Bible exist, the English Bible also has different versions which emanated from the variegated forms of translation. These translations originate as a result of the fact that the translators had various perspectives of translations. In addition, these translators also had specific motives that led to their choice of translation which culminated what is now referred to as versions.

Translation has been described in so many ways and each translation has its peculiar features that distinguish it from the others. These characteristics vividly explicate the essence of translations, according to different translators. In the words of a French theorist, Dubois (1974), ‘translation is the expression in another language (or the target language) of what has been expressed in another source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences.’ According to Nida and Taber (1969), “translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.” The definitions by Dubois and Nida and Taber illustrate the fact that translators’ motive is basically to identify ‘equivalence’.

To further emphasize the relevance of equivalence in translations, Meetham and Catford (1965), state that

“translation is the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL). Similarly, Meethan and Hudston’s (1972) view is that “translation is the replacement of a text in one language by a replacement of textual material in a second language.” Functionalists have a relatively different view of what translation entails. In the words Nord, in Shuttleworth and Cowie (2007), “translation is the production of a functional target text maintaining a relationship with a given source text that is specified according to the intended or demanded function of the target text. This definition simply implies that Nord is interested in having the target language perform communicative function(s) and not necessarily to maintain a direct equivalence in the process of the translation. Nord (2007:141) also attempts to create a distinction between wide and narrow translation when he states that translation is, in a normal narrow sense,

Any translational action where a source text is transferred into a target culture and language. According to the form and presentation of the source text and to the correctibility of the target text we distinguish between oral translation (=interpreting) and written translation (=translation in the narrow sense).

Translation, in the context of this study, is a TL product which is accurate when compared with the syntax, semantics and grammar of the SL. It is believed that the translators’ main objective should not be focused only on the accuracy of the semantic transference from the TL to the SL but also on the syntax. This is in accordance with Wilss’ (1969) view that “the notion of translation competence is aptly assessed in transfer situations that require at least some degree of

adaptation to new and challenging textual demands.” There are notable constraints to all forms of translations at different levels. Some of the obvious constraints are evident in the discrepancies that exist between the different linguistic levels of the TL and the SL. Also, cultural and temporal factors play significant roles in the challenge faced in the course of translations. These point to the fact that, since no two languages are exactly the same, it is practically impossible for any translation to be done from one language to another without conspicuous deviations or differences.

This study therefore explores and explicates the reasons behind the seeming patriarchal disposition of the English Bible translations and also indicates the nexus among the different translations of the English Bible and their recognition of gender inclusivity. In order to achieve a logical discourse, the study was divided into five subheadings: The introduction was followed by the second section discusses the emergence of the Bible and subsequently, the English Bible and how the various versions emanated. The third sections presents an overview of what constitutes the different grammatical and syntactic (written) utterances with reference to the translations of the Bible. The fourth section examines the various forms of feminist thoughts, additionally, the idea of patriarchy and androcentrism is refuted, using copious evidence of inundating recognition of the status of the females, from different translations of the Bible. The study is concluded in the fifth section.

Speech Acts: Grammar and Syntax of Translations

Language has many different functions just as there are different occasions for using language. However, a single utterance may have other overlapping purposes. Sentences

have such functions such as declarative, imperative and interrogative. Sentences are said to be declarative if they tell something; interrogative if they ask, or imperative if they request action. Kreidler (1998:194) asserts:

Whenever one person speaks to another, the speaker has some intention in producing the others and the addressee interprets the utterance. In spite of occasional misunderstandings, the hearer's interpretation often does match the speaker's intention, even when the speaker is joking or being sarcastic... In every speech act, we can distinguish three things; what is said, the utterance can be called the locution. What the speaker intends to communicate to the addressee is the illocution. The message that the addressee gets, his interpretation of what the speaker says is the perlocution. If the communication is successful, illocution and the perlocution are alike or nearly alike.

The speech acts as propounded by Austin and Searle (1960) are: Assertive, Performative, Verdictive, Expressive, Directive, Commissive and Phatic. Speech acts, according to Kreidler (1998), "differ in their purposes, whether they deal with real or potential facts, prospective or retrospective, in the role of speaker or addressee in these facts, and of course in felicity conditions". One of the major kinds of speech acts is the assertive acts and according to Ayeomoni and Akinkuolere (2015), "they are statements that describe a state of affairs in the world, which could be true or false". They include: stating, claiming, reporting and announcing. The language is concerned with facts and the purpose is to inform-

‘My house is a stone’s throw from the university’. The information passed in the afore-mentioned sentence, according to them, can be said to be assertive. When assertive utterances focus on information, it uses verbs such as: *announce, declare, disclose, mention, report, indicate, express, proclaim, express*. When the focus is on truth-value of utterance, the following verbs are used: *affirm, assert, guarantee, attest, claim, contend, concede, swear*. However, if the focus is on the speaker’s commitment or involvement in what is reported, the verbs used will be: *protest, deny, confide*. If the focus is on manner of communicating, *emphasize, intimate, hint* will be used. Also, when the focus is on the message, *narrate, dictate, preach* will be used.

Furthermore, they also opine that speech acts that bring about the state of affairs they name are called performative. Performative utterances, according to them, are valid if spoken by someone whose right to make them is accepted and in circumstances which are accepted as appropriate. The verbs used may include *pronounce, baptize, declare*. In using the performative sentence, the subject of the sentence must be ‘I’ or ‘we’ and the verb must be in the present tense. For instance, ‘I pronounce you husband and wife’. Again, the speaker must be appropriate. In the afore-mentioned sentence, the speaker is in most cases a clergyman. In inaugural speeches, such performative utterances are not uncommon. Also, such utterances are neither true nor false but its purpose is to make a part of the world conform to what is said. Blessings and curses are performative utterances.

Verdictive utterances, as the name implies, are speech acts in which the speaker makes an assessment or judgement about the acts of another, usually the person being addressed. Verdictive utterances can either be viewed positively or negatively. For instance, the following expressions are part of

verdictive utterances that have been viewed positively: ‘thanks/praise/commend for...’, ‘congratulate on...’. Some other verdictives can be viewed negatively- ‘blame/criticize for...’ and ‘accuse of...’. The conditions for the verdictives are the possibility of the act, the ability of the addressee to perform it, the sincerity of the speaker in making the utterance and the addressee’s belief that the speaker is sincere. Expressive utterances emanate from previous actions or failure to act of the speaker. Ogbulogo (2005) views these as acts that show the psychological state- feelings and attitudes towards some events and affairs.” While a verdictive utterance is about what the person being addressed had previously done, an expressive utterance focuses on the failure of previous action of the speaker. The common verbs used by the expressive utterances are: *acknowledge*, *deny*, *apologize*. Directive utterances, in the words of Ogbulogo (2005), refer to a question, command, request, plea or invitation where “the addressee is instructed to carry out some instruction by responding verbally to an utterance or by performing some physical actions. In other words, it is used to tell other people to do something. When the utterance can be carried out, it is felicitous otherwise it is infelicitous. There are, however, other kinds of directive utterances: command (if the speaker has some degree of control over the actions of the addressee); request (an expression of what the speaker wants the addressee to do or refrain from doing); suggestions (the utterances we make to other persons to give our opinions as to what they should or should not do.

Commissive utterances commit a speaker to a course of action. Ogbulogo (2005) opines that these utterances make the speaker commit “to some future actions as in challenging, betting, promising, offering, threatening, vowing, warning.”

Commissive actions include promises, pledges, threats and vows. The verbs used in commissive actions include ‘agree’, ‘ask’, ‘offer’, ‘refuse’, ‘swear’, ‘promise’, ‘pledge’. As the name implies, the commissive utterances are used to commit oneself to future action. For instance, ‘I promise to serve Nigeria with all my strength’. The verb used must be in the present tense and there must be an addressee (whether it is stated or not). Also, the subject used is ‘I’ or ‘we’. Phatic expressions are speech acts that establish rapport between members of the same society. Phatic utterances include greetings, farewells, polite statements such as: ‘Excuse me’, ‘Thank you’, ‘You’re welcome’. Phatic expressions are valid when the speaker and addressees share the same social customs. Kreidler (1998:208) summarizes the speech acts as follows:

Utterances can be classified according to the general purpose of the speaker, which when communication is successful, is also the addressee’s interpretation.... Predicates used in these speech acts and/or in utterances that report them can be further described according to their relative strength, politeness, antecedents and consequences. Direct speech acts contain a first-person pronoun and a predicate that specifies what the utterance is; an indirect speech act lacks these. For each of these kinds of utterance certain conditions must be present in speaker, addressee, and various circumstances for the utterance to be felicitous.

To also summarize, Crystal (2008:446), opines that speech act:

analyzes the role of utterances in relation to the behaviour of the speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication. It is... a communicative activity (a locutionary act), defined with reference to the intentions of speakers while speaking (the illocutionary force of their utterances) and the effects they achieve on listeners (the perlocutionary effect of their utterances). Several categories of the speech act have been proposed, viz. Directives (speakers try to get their listeners to do something e.g. begging, commanding, requesting), Comissives (speakers commit themselves to a future course of action, e.g. promising, guaranteeing), Expressives (speakers express their feelings e.g. apologizing, welcoming, sympathizing), Declarations (the speaker's utterance brings about a new external situation, e.g. christening, marrying, resigning) and Representatives (speakers convey their belief about the truth of a proposition...

It is worthy of note that utterances differ according to the language. At the different levels of linguistics, no two languages, including are exactly the same. The original biblical languages- Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic have differing syntax and semantics. According to Spackman (2014:34),

...biblical Hebrew had no formal punctuation, no capitals, and variable word order. Consequently, a Hebrew translator cannot always easily determine if a word is a proper

name or if it belongs to the ending of one phrase or the beginning of the next. Deciding where one sentence ends and another begins can be difficult particularly since Hebrew uses “and” much more frequently and differently than English. Translators have to decide where the breaks are in the text, and how to represent that in the target language.

Spackman (2014) has also identified another issue with Hebrew when he states that Hebrew “does not require pronouns with verbs; one can simply say ‘ate’ instead of ‘he ate’. Thus, lacking an explicit subject, translators must decide if the subject is new and assumed (he? It? God?) or carried over from something in the previous phrase.” These ambiguities combined with lexical difficulties make the translators to resort to the best available equivalence in translation in order to achieve the task of interpretation.

It is obvious that even if two translators understand a verse of the Bible, it is practically impossible for them to use the same range of vocabulary in the transmitting the utterances from the source language to the target language. Translations of the Bible are, therefore, not expected to have the same style, emotion, tone and exact diction. Besides being monotonous, there may not be any need to keep translating. Scores of the translations of the English Bible are still being published even in the 21st century. The intent of the translators should definitely be to create more vivid expositions to subtle messages that eluded previous versions and also produce a peculiar text. Thus, even among the versions that explored the same approach to translations, the style and diction distinguish one from the others. The synoptic gospels, for instance, narrated similar incidences, but different versions of the bible use different methods of

translations and still produced differing semantic implications.

Biblical Meaning and the Gender Sense

Meaning is more than denotation and connotation. The meaning of a word depends on its associations with other words. This refers to the relational aspect. Lexemes contribute meanings to the utterances in which they occur and the meanings they contribute depend on other lexemes they are associated with. According to Kreidler (1998:59),

Part of this relationship is seen in the way words do or do not go together meaningfully. It makes sense to say *john walked* and it makes sense to say *An hour elapsed*. It doesn't make sense to say *john elapsed* or *An hour walked*. Part of the meaning of *elapse* is that it goes with *hour, second, minutes, days* but not with *John*, and part of the meaning of *hour, second* and so forth is that these words can co-occur with *elapse* .

Meaning also varies with context. Each lexeme is somewhat linked to numerous other lexemes. There are notably two kinds of linkage. The first is the relation of the lexeme with other lexemes in a phrase or sentence. This mutual association of two or more words in a sequence in such a way that the meaning of one affects the other(s) is referred to as syntagmatic relations. Even though the meaning of a lexeme affects the meaning of the other ones in a sentence, the meanings of the lexemes together contribute to the general meaning of the phrase or sentence. Another kind of relationship is paradigmatic, which is a relation of choice.

In this form of meaning relationship, the choice of words is made from among the number of possible words that can fill the same blank: the words may be synonymous or have little in common but each of the words is different from others.

So, just as words have meanings that can be analysed in relation to other meanings which has been referred to as sense meanings or relations, sentences, according to William O’Grady, John Archibald and Francis Katamba (2011), also confirm that “sentences... can be analysed in terms of their relation to other meanings. Three such relations- paraphrase, entailment and contradiction- are particularly important”. Ogbulogo (2005:49) puts it thus:

Sense or lexical relations are concerned with the meaning of individual words. However, the function of theories of meaning includes the explication of sentences. A great deal of the problems of communication derives from the confusion at the level of sentences. It is therefore important that you explore sources of these problems. We do not communicate with isolated words. Indeed, knowledge of language and the art of communication depend on our ability to combine words in a systematic way.

The inclusive bible translations argue for gender-conscious translations or what may be referred to as gender-neutral language(s). This implies that inclusive translations are expected to support gynocentrism in biblical texts. In the words of Scholz (2010),

The controversies about inclusive Bible translations are less about literalist-linguistic differences that emerge in the nitty-gritty task of translating texts than about profound theological and socio-political disagreements.

Inclusive Bible translations challenge established religious-institutional identities and practices that favour androcentrism and other structures of domination. Consequently, resistance to these translations is strong from both religious and secular powers and authority.

So many feminists think that the (English) Bible is engrossed with patriarchy and androcentrism. They find this unacceptable and unbalanced. Osiek (1967) however explains that “patriarchy and androcentrism were seen not as sinful but as maintaining order.” This means that if there is any evidence of patriarchy in the Bible, it can be traced to cultural influence. Felix (1994) adds that “evangelical feminists are correct in observing that certain biblical texts are cultural”. An evangelical feminist according to Felix (1994) has a high view of scripture and is one who believes that the Bible teaches the full equality of men and women without role distinctions based on gender. “On the other hand, he posits that “a patriarchal culture does not necessarily mandate an improper view toward women”.

Inasmuch as staunch Christian feminists hold strongly to the view that almost all parts of the (English) Bible focus on male chauvinism, both the Old Testament and the New Testament exhibit verses that recognize the enviable roles of females at several positions. One of such lines is prominent in Romans 16: 1-2 where Sister Phoebe was highly commended in New King James Version:

I commend you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Crenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in

whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

Similarly, 1 Corinthians 11:10-12 (NKJV) writes of the gender equality of men and women.

For this reason, the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.... Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman nor woman independent of man, in the Lord.... For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God.

The recognition of females are quite inundating in the books of the New Testament. The Old Testament also has its series. For instance, in the book of Zephaniah 3:14 (NKJV), a beloved city, Israel is referred to as a woman: “Sing O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem”.

Conclusion

The Bible has passed through different forms of translations and the English version eventually evolved. The English Bible also has versions or translations that resulted from different approaches to translation. Christian feminists, who work from the standpoint of a commitment to the Christian faith but accept the authority of the scripture in only a limited way, argue that the (English) Bible is patriarchal and androcentric in nature. However, it has been revealed that though there are copious instances of patriarchal prominence in the (English) Bible, the recognition of gender-equality and female prowess exists.

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