

## RELEVANCE THEORY AND THE TRANSLATION OF SCRIPTURE

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In recent years the religion of Islam has assumed much greater prominence in western society than ever before.<sup>1</sup> One of the striking differences between Islam and Christianity is in the doctrine of Scripture. Muslims revere their foundational text, the Koran, as God's word and consequently insist that it must not be translated and should be read only in the language in which Mohammed wrote it, namely Arabic. Any edition of the Koran in a modern language is considered to be an interpretation of or a commentary on the Koran. In contrast, Christianity from its earliest days translated the OT and NT into various languages of the Mediterranean world. Following Catholic opposition to vernacular translations in the medieval period, the Protestant Reformation renewed this practice, most famously by Martin Luther's German translation. In fact, one of the corollaries of the Protestant Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* was the publication of the Bible in the language of the people. The Reformation probably would not have happened without Luther's translation into German. Today evangelical Protestantism has zealously supported the translation of God's word into all the languages of the world, as the mission of organizations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators and the International Bible Society attests. This difference in attitude toward Scripture is one of many between Christianity and Islam that reveals profound implications for how each religion perceives the nature of God and his relationship to humankind.

The question of the divine authority of translated Scripture is, of course, one that deeply concerns evangelicals whose doctrine locates divine inspiration, and consequently divine authority, in autographs that were originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and yet who confidently preach the authority of God's word in English translation. This raises interesting questions at the theoretical level about an evangelical philosophy or theology

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of language and at the level of praxis about what relationship a translation of Scripture must have to the original in order to have God's authority behind it.

Evangelicals claim that because God's authority is behind the words of the original texts of the Bible, his authority also stands behind translations of the Bible into other languages *as long as the translations are faithful to the original language*. However, what constitutes faithfulness to the original is hotly debated among evangelicals. Currently some argue that formal equivalence (also referred to as formal correspondence)—where the literal *form* of the original text is preserved in translation as much as possible—is more consistent with evangelical belief in the inerrancy and verbal inspiration of God's word than is functional equivalence (also referred to as dynamic equivalence) which aims to communicate the meaning of the original even if elements such as word order and syntax are not preserved in the translation.<sup>2</sup> The heat this argument has generated—especially if one is on the hot seat as a Bible translator—is almost enough to make one envy Muslims, who avoid the problem simply by disallowing translation of their sacred text at all.<sup>3</sup>

Just about every Bible translation has stirred hot controversy beginning with the Septuagint. In the third century before Christ the needs of the Greek speaking Jews of Alexandria, Egypt motivated the first translation of the Hebrew Pentateuch into Greek. The NT writers later quoted that Greek translation of the OT frequently as they proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ in the writings that Christians receive, together with the OT, as God's divinely inspired and authoritative word. Although the Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible were used in the ancient Greek-speaking synagogues for centuries, the idea of Bible translation was controversial even in those times. By the second century of our era, Semitic-speaking Jews held to a view not unlike Muslims concerning the translation of the Holy writings, for the Talmud states that, "The day on which the Greek translation was made was as ominous for Israel

<sup>2</sup> Arguing for functional equivalence are, for instance, D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation—and Other Limits Too," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World: Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood* (ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 65–113; Mark L. Strauss, "Do Literal Bible Versions Show Greater Respect for Plenary Inspiration? (A Response to Wayne Grudem)" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the ETS, Valley Forge, PA, Nov. 16, 2005); idem, "Form, Function, and the 'Literal Meaning' Fallacy in Bible Translation," *The Bible Translator* 56/3 (July 2005) 153–68; Mark L. Strauss and Gordon D. Fee, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

Those defending formal equivalence are Wayne Grudem, "Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God? Why Plenary Inspiration Favors 'Essentially Literal' Bible Translation in *Translating Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005) 19–56; Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002); and Raymond Van Leeuwen, "We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation," *CT* 45/13 (Oct. 2, 2001) 28–35.

<sup>3</sup> However, with more westerners who do not read Arabic becoming Muslim, this same controversy is on the rise within Muslim communities in North America. See Neil MacFarquhar, "New Translation Prompts Debate on Islamic Verse," *New York Times*, March 25, 2007.

as the day on which Israel made the Golden Calf in the wilderness; for the Torah could not be translated adequately" (*Sep. Torah* 1.8).<sup>4</sup>

But even Greek-speaking Jews for whom the translation was originally produced also recognized potential problems in the translation of texts. In the prologue of Ecclesiasticus, Ben Sira's grandson pleads for the reader's forbearance of his Greek translation of a wisdom book originally written in Hebrew by his grandfather when he says, "Things originally spoken in Hebrew do not have the same force in them when they are translated into another language" (Sir 21–22).

Such skepticism about the efficacy of translation grew over time, so that by the late second century Judaism officially turned against the translation of the Bible at all. R. Judah b. Ilai, a pupil of R. Akiba at the end of the second century, put the translator between a rock and a hard place when he taught that "he who translates literally is a liar, while he who adds anything [by way of paraphrase] is a blasphemer" (*b. Qidd.* 49a; *t. Meg.* 4.41). Among orthodox Jews even to this day, the Hebrew Bible cannot be translated. It was from this ancient attitude toward the translation of religious texts that the later Muslim doctrine of Scripture emerged.

These ancient attitudes towards the translation of religious texts make it all the more remarkable that the apostles of Jesus Christ apparently did not hesitate to preserve our Lord's teachings in Greek translation or to use the Greek translation of the OT authoritatively in their writings that became the NT.<sup>5</sup> By implication, the ultimate author of the NT, God himself, apparently had no qualms with translating the gospel into Greek. Therefore, the example of the NT itself provides the warrant for the translation of the Bible into other languages.

However, a skepticism about whether meaning is fully transferable between languages has been expressed in our times as an extension of a principle of linguistic relativity formulated from the cumulative work of Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf that the worldview of a given culture and its language are so mutually defining that there are no universals across all languages.<sup>6</sup> While the idea of linguistic relativity has flourished among anthropologists and sociologists, cognitive scientists have responded with findings of significant ways that all languages share phonetic, grammatical, and semantic similarities that are based on embodied experience with the physical world

<sup>4</sup> *The Minor Tractates of the Talmud. Massektoth Ketannah* (trans. A. Cohen; London: Soncino, 1971) 2.632.

<sup>5</sup> And for this, Christianity has been faulted in some Jewish thought. See José Faur, *Golden Doves With Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986) 50.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin L. Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (ed. J. B. Carroll; Cambridge: MIT, 1956); Georgios Tserdanelis and Wai Yi Peggy Wong, eds., *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language & Linguistics* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004) 505–8.

and that can be considered linguistic universals.<sup>7</sup> Work in the cognitive sciences of the last thirty or forty years has caused a rethinking of linguistic relativity in recognition that the physiology of the human brain and its cognitive functions at the neural level are universals that constitute how language is processed in the mind. This has given rise to a mediating position that has been congenial to the emergence of a new theory of how language communicates meaning, relevance theory.<sup>8</sup>

Since the vast majority of Christians read Scripture in translation, the question of the relationship of a translation to the original with respect to divine authority is of weighty importance. In recent times some have answered the question by claiming that if a translation functions with divine authority within a community, then that translation is by definition divinely inspired.<sup>9</sup> The idea of an inspired translation has long been a minority position within the Judeo-Christian tradition, for the inspiration of the Septuagint translation was taught both by the Jewish scholar Philo as well as by St. Augustine precisely in order to uphold the divine authority of the Greek OT. Augustine believed the Old Greek translation of the OT was divinely inspired, but *only* that one, specific Greek translation (and there were several other Greek versions in existence) because Augustine reasoned that God had anticipated the use of the Septuagint by the writers of the Greek NT. However, evangelicals do not follow Augustine in his beliefs about the Septuagint and rightly reserve the word “inspiration” for the original autographs of the books of the Bible. However if we reject the idea that any translation of Scripture is endowed with divine inspiration by virtue of its use in a community of faith, we are then left to seek a Christian theology of language and its implications for the practice of Bible translation that justifies the claim of a *derived* divine authority for a translation while locating the inspiration and inerrancy in the original autographs. This paper aims to make a small contribution to that conversation.

To claim any measure of divine authority, the translated text must *communicate* the same meaning in the target language as the source text *communicated* in the original language. But this involves us in a number of philosophical and practical questions: What does it mean specifically for a translation of a text to faithfully communicate the same meaning as the original from which it was produced? How do we know what that meaning was? Is it even possible to translate the meaning of the original language of

<sup>7</sup> Jerome A. Feldman, *From Molecule to Metaphor: A Neural Theory of Language*, (Cambridge: MIT, 2006); Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994); Bernard Comrie, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Joseph Greenberg, ed., *Universals of Language* (Cambridge: MIT, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> John J. Gumperz and Stephen C. Levinson, eds., *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 3.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, see Craig D. Allert, “Is a Translation Inspired? The Problems of Verbal Inspiration for Translation and a Proposed Solution” in *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects* (ed. Stanley Porter and Richard Hess; London: T & T Clark, 1999) 85–113.

the Bible accurately into any and every other language? (This certainly is the assumption of Wycliffe, the United Bible Societies, and other Christian Bible translation projects.) Can authentic transfer of meaning between languages actually take place? One might think that skepticism about the efficacy of translated texts that are not religious texts is a modern theory that has held sway in linguistics ever since the work of Humboldt-Whorf-Sapir, but in fact, skepticism about the transfer of meaning between two languages is expressed in the writings of the third century pagan, neo-Platonist philosopher Iamblichus who observed, “there are certain idioms in every nation that are impossible to express in the language of another. Moreover, even if one were to translate them, this would not preserve their same power” (Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 7.5).

After briefly outlining a biblical theology of language, this paper explores relevance theory as it bears on the question of what characteristics a translation must have to be faithful to the original.

### I. CONTROLLING BELIEFS

To think Christianly about modern linguistic theories, our control beliefs must come from the Word of God, either explicitly stated in the Bible or as a necessary entailment of explicit biblical statements. Nicolas Wolterstorff reminds us that:

The Christian scholar ought to allow the belief-content of his authentic Christian commitment to function as control within his devising and weighing of theories. For he like everyone else ought to seek consistency, wholeness, and integrity in the body of his beliefs and commitments. . . . he ought to devise theories which comport as well as possible with, or are at least consistent with, the belief-content of his authentic commitment.<sup>10</sup>

And so it is to Scripture that the Christian must look for controlling beliefs about language and translation. There we find that the Bible contains the warrant for its own translation.

1. *Creation (Gen 1:1–31; 2:7)*. The first act of God recorded in the Hebrew Bible was creation. And unlike all other ancient creation stories, the God of the Bible did not give birth to the universe, nor did he create it from the body of a slain enemy. The Bible tells us that God *spoke* the universe into existence.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים . . . וַיְהִי

(And God said . . . and it was)

Divine *language* created the universe. God *spoke* light, water, the sun, moon and stars, plants and animals into existence. This means that God

<sup>10</sup> Wolterstorff quoting himself in “Reason within the Bounds of Religion” in *Educating for Shalom. Essays on Christian Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 76.

structured and ordered the universe in which we live using his divine language. When he created the human being, he endowed us with the ability to use language, first exercised when Adam named the creatures of our world (Gen 2:19). Therefore human language and divine language form a system. Human language *describes* the world that God *created(-es)* using divine language. This yields controlling belief #1: there is a fundamental correspondence between language used by human creatures and the world made by the Creator's language—made independently of the human mind.<sup>11</sup> Further in Genesis we learn that God created human language with a purpose, in order for him to communicate with his human creation and for human beings to communicate with each other (Gen 1:27; 2:16–23; 3:8–20). This is controlling belief #2. But, unfortunately, the story does not end there.

2. *The fall (Gen 3:1–7).* The Genesis account to the fall of Adam and Eve into sin reveals that the fall is also an event that centrally involves *language*. The serpent tempted Eve by using language to describe a false reality that did *not* match the reality created by God's language (i.e. God's word). The word Adam and Eve had received from God was that if they ate the fruit of a particular tree, they would die. That was the reality constituted by God's divine language. The serpent, on the other hand, used language to describe a different, false reality. According to Satan, if Eve ate the fruit, she would not die, but she would become like God himself. And with this, two competing "realities" were presented to the human being: that ultimate and true reality presented by God's word that was opposed by a virtual and false "reality" that Satan's word created. Eve chose to act upon the virtual reality created by Satan's words instead of the ultimate reality created by God's words. And ever since then, there has been slippage between the true and ultimate reality created by God and the distorted virtual realities we often tell others (either inadvertently or deliberately) in our fallenness. Because the fall was a linguistic event, God's *verbal* revelation became necessary. To be reconciled to God we must believe God's description of reality found in the Bible if we are to understand the truth about ourselves and our place in the universe. Controlling belief #3: Even the relationship between language and the created order has been affected by the fall. It is perhaps the fallen-ness of human language that gives rise to the radical skepticism about language's ability to articulate truth that is found in (post-) modern semiotic theory as articulated for instance in some various strands of Barthes,<sup>12</sup> Derrida, Eco, and Lyotard.

3. *The confusion of language at Babel (Gen 11:1–9).* Genesis 11 reveals that at one time the whole world had one language and a common speech.

<sup>11</sup> The popular idea that human thought and language create reality as often taught by sociologists today is, in its most radical expression, an example of the autonomy of the self that when pushed to its logical end violates the Creator-creature distinction that is fundamental to Christian theology.

<sup>12</sup> Barthes's statement, "The Text . . . practices the infinite deferral of the signified" is an example of this skepticism (quoted in George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001] 15).

But after the fall, language was corrupted by the purposes of human hearts that were in rebellion against God. A common language unified all of humanity allowing them to join together in a project that defied the rule of heaven. Rather than filling the earth as God commanded in Gen 1:28, the people built a tower in an attempt to not be scattered (Gen 11:4). Their common language represented the collective power of humanity to band together in monumental sin and to seek significance apart from God. God gave language to humankind to use in its commission to bring the world under dominion, but the people at Babel used it in an attempt to rival God.<sup>13</sup> And so the Lord sovereignly confused that one language into many and frustrated their intent by scattering them from that place over the whole earth. This story teaches that God is responsible for the diversity of languages in the world and therefore can use that diversity to his purposes. From this story comes controlling belief #4: God has created the diversity of human languages and the rules which define that linguistic diversity. And controlling belief #5: Because God created the rules by which language works, human language offers no barrier to his purposes nor can it frustrate his ability to communicate.

4. *Pentecost (Acts 2)*. Given the linguistic nature of the fall, it is joyfully reassuring to see the redemption of language when Christ ascends and sends the Holy Spirit upon those who have come to know Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Although speaking in tongues is most often discussed in the context of whether Christians today should or can do it or not, the point in Acts 2 is profoundly theological and redemptive. Speaking in tongues as a physical manifestation of the coming of the Spirit into the nascent Christian church demonstrated, among other important things, that Jesus Christ has redeemed human language. In Christ the schism between language and divine reality that the serpent invoked has been redeemed so that the world may hear the wonders of God truly proclaimed. All of the foreign visitors to Jerusalem on that day of Pentecost in the year Jesus died heard the first Christians proclaiming the wonders of God each in “our native language”—Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya near Cyrene, Rome, Cretans, and Arabs (Acts 2:8–11). While this is a miraculous event of unmediated “translation” by the Spirit and while it is not certain that each person heard the functional equivalent of the message that everyone else heard, the point is that the Spirit “spoke” in not one language but a vast array of languages and all who heard got the same point. Pentecost shows that there is no human language that is unsuitable for communicating God’s word. And so from Pentecost come controlling beliefs #6: meaning is sufficiently transferable between languages for God’s purposes, and #7: there is no human language that is unsuitable for communicating God’s word.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 161–62, 175–84.

5. *The Revelation of John (Rev 14:6)*. Finally the last book of the Bible that teaches spiritual realities in visual images describes an “angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, *language*, and people” (emphasis added). Since when missionaries reach a previously unevangelized population they do not find that unreached people have received the gospel of Jesus Christ through unmediated revelation by the Spirit, Rev 14:6 implies that Bible translation is an essential part of God’s redemptive plan. The diversity of human languages presents no barrier to God’s redemptive purposes in Christ. The controlling belief here (#8) is that Bible translation is an essential part of God’s redemptive plan.

Therefore, a biblical theology of language shows that Christians, unlike Muslims and orthodox Jews, are not only warranted to translate the Bible into the languages of the world, but have a biblical mandate to do so.

## II. TRANSLATION THEORY

The work of Israeli linguist Gideon Toury of Tel Aviv University has been prominent in the scholarship of translation theory for the last twenty years.<sup>14</sup> Toury’s transfer postulate states that the process of translation involves the transference of certain features from the source text that will be shared with the target text.<sup>15</sup> Every translator must work under some transfer postulate, even if it has not been consciously articulated. In fact, the ubiquitous assumption that translation is to transfer meaning between two languages obscures other possible goals in translation, such as, for instance, a phonetic transfer principle that preserves the sound or the form of the source language. Either goal might be appropriate for translating some forms of poetry, for instance by preserving the acrostic form of a poem in translation. A phonetic “translation” (i.e. transliteration) might be employed where someone needs to “read” in a foreign language in which they are not competent. Septuagint scholars know of a version of the Hebrew Torah written in Greek letters, allowing a Greek-speaker to pronounce the sound of the Hebrew text, which might have aided the “reading” of the Hebrew Scriptures in the diaspora synagogues.<sup>16</sup> In fact, such a view would quickly move toward the Muslim position of rejecting translation at all. Since the Reformation, the Protestant doctrine of Scripture rejects a view of inerrancy that so reveres the original words that the *form* of the original text—whether its phonetic sound or written form—rather than its meaning is thought necessary

<sup>14</sup> Gideon Toury, *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (Tel Aviv University: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 1980); idem, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Toury, *In Search of a Theory of Translation* 33–34.

<sup>16</sup> Origen’s Hexapla had as its first column a transliteration of the Hebrew text into Greek letters, as well as various Greek translations in adjacent columns.

to preserve God's authority in translation. Of his translation philosophy Luther wrote,

I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since it was German I had undertaken to speak in the translation . . . Therefore I must let the literal words go and try to learn how the German says that which the Hebrew [or Greek] expresses. . . . Words are to serve and follow the meaning, not meaning the words (*Luther's Works* 35:188–89, 193, 213).<sup>17</sup>

In his preface to his translation of Job, Luther furthermore writes,

. . . if it were translated everywhere word for word—as the Jews [i.e. the Septuagint] and foolish translators would have it done—and not for the most part according to the sense, no one would understand it. . . . We have taken care to use language that is clear and that everybody can understand, without perverting the sense and meaning (*Luther's Works* 35:252–53).<sup>18</sup>

Bible translators today continue the tradition by seeking a semantic transfer of meaning such that the translation communicates to its target audience the same meaning the original language communicated. *The ideal transfer will result in such a relationship between the translation and its source text such that a targeted reader of the translation will derive the same meaning as if he or she were reading the original language.* Therefore, to determine a transfer principle that achieves semantic transfer between languages, consideration of *how* language communicates meaning comes into play, bringing us to the field of psycho-linguistics.

### III. RELEVANCE THEORY

Relevance theory is receiving much attention among Bible translators and is gaining ground in biblical hermeneutics.<sup>19</sup> The field of pragmatics from which it emerged is concerned with the contextual and inferential aspects of language communication, namely the relationship between how what is implied in language contributes to the meaning of what is explicitly said. For decades linguists worked with a model of communication that considered meaning to be encoded into words that were strung together like cars of a freight train to carry meaning between two people. The ideas of Eugene Nida, the linguist who has been most influential in Bible translation, developed

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, "On Translating: An Open Letter, 1530" in *Word and Sacrament I* (ed. E. Theodore Bachmann; trans. Charles M. Jacobs; Vol. 35; *Luther's Works*; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 175–202.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the Old Testament" in *Word and Sacrament I* (trans. Charles M. Jacobs; ed. E. Theodore Bachmann; vol. 35; *Luther's Works*; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 233–334.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, see Jeannine K. Brown's introductory biblical hermeneutics textbook, *Scripture as Communication* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007). Interest among biblical scholars is attested by the new program unit in the Society of Biblical Literature, "Relevance Theory and Biblical Interpretation," which was chaired by Gene Green at its July 2007 international meeting.

during the era when meaning was thought to be encoded exhaustively in words.<sup>20</sup> It is Nida's work that has most influenced the theory and practice of modern Bible translation.

Distancing itself from the code model of language, relevance theory has instead turned to principles of cognitive psychology and it attempts to work out in detail the linguistic claim that "an essential feature of most human communication is the expression and recognition of intentions."<sup>21</sup> This inferential model of how meaning is related to words takes human communication seriously by assuming that a communicator "provides evidence of her intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided."<sup>22</sup> Relevance theory has appeal because (1) it seems compatible with Christian controlling beliefs, especially in its relatively optimistic understanding of language as communication; (2) its emphasis on the speaker's or author's intention to communicate brings a welcome corrective to the reader-response hermeneutic that resulted from the over-zealous application of Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Intentional Fallacy*; (3) it is based on a model of human cognitive processes that is not language or culture specific, making it appropriate for issues of biblical interpretation and translation that necessarily involve at least two languages; and (4) it explicitly accounts for the role context plays in determining meaning, which previous models of language acknowledged but did not explicate.

Relevance theory has been developed most famously over the last twenty years in the collaborations of Dan Sperber in Paris and Deirdre Wilson in London.<sup>23</sup> The field of pragmatics is concerned with the contextual and inferential aspects of language communication, namely the relationship between how what is only implied in a statement contributes to determining the meaning of what is explicitly said. Furthermore, relevance theory ties language to reality through psychological processes of human cognition that are considered universal because it takes as its basis the way the human brain functions in processing language.

Although there are many theories of the neural representation of knowledge in the brain, no one has established experimentally how words and concepts are represented by neural structure and activity.<sup>24</sup> There does seem to be a consensus in the cognitive sciences that thought and language occur in

<sup>20</sup> Eugene A. Nida, *God's Word in Man's Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952); idem, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill 1969); J. de Waard and E. A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, "Relevance Theory" in *Blackwell's Handbook of Pragmatics* (ed. L. Horn and G. Ward; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 607–32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 607.

<sup>23</sup> Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986; 2d rev. ed, 1995). Sperber holds a research professorship at the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris; Wilson is a Professor of Linguistics at University College in London.

<sup>24</sup> See Feldman, *Molecule to Metaphor*.

the brain within neural systems that work by neural computation involving the firing of synapses and not by formal symbol manipulation assumed by older models of language.<sup>25</sup>

This union of linguistics and the cognitive sciences attempts to account for the role of context in determining the meaning of language, an element lacking in the older approach to meaning based solely on lexical semantics in which the meaning of a statement was thought to be coded into the words comprising it.<sup>26</sup> Sperber and Wilson give no attention to the neural substrate of language processing, but the constructs on which they build relevance theory seem compatible with concepts from cognitive science such as neural *best-fit matching* networks, *spreading activation* of neural networks in language processing, universal conceptual *schemas* that arise from embodied experience with the physical world, and *cultural frames* of words, concepts, and relationships that characterize areas of human experience that are not universal.<sup>27</sup>

Sperber and Wilson base their theory on two principles of human cognitive psychology: (1) that the human mind subconsciously attends only to information that it deems relevant to itself; and (2) that the human mind is geared to achieve the greatest possible cognitive effect while exerting the smallest possible mental processing effort in a context of available assumptions. A linguistic input is relevant to a person “when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a POSITIVE COGNITIVE EFFECT,” that is, one that makes a difference to the person’s representation of the world (small caps original).<sup>28</sup> (Or, to put it in the terms of a cognitive scientist, the highest level of linguistic comprehension while exerting the smallest cortical processing.) All things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effect achieved, the greater the relevance of the linguistic input and the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the linguistic input.<sup>29</sup>

Although Sperber and Wilson do not cite neuro-science in defense of their theory, “relevance” as they define the term by these two principles seems to correspond to what cognitive scientists call neural best-fit matching networks in the brain. The connections that form these networks begin to develop *en utero* as the auditory system begins to tune these neural networks to discriminate spoken language from noise. The first and most basic step in language processing—long before one learns to understand and speak language—is to become equipped to recognize which sounds comprise one’s language, that is, of all the noise in the world, only sounds that comprise one’s own language(s) are *relevant* for language processing. Feldman cites research that “indicates that infants, immediately after birth, preferentially recognize the sounds of their native language over others,” presumably because the

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>26</sup> See Gene Green, “Lexical Pragmatics and Biblical Interpretation” (also published in the present *Journal*) for a critique of lexical semantics by the principles of relevance theory and the example of how it informs an understanding of Phil 2:11.

<sup>27</sup> Feldman, *Molecule to Metaphor*, passim.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson and Sperber, “Relevance Theory” 608.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 609.

sound of their mother's language heard in the womb stimulated certain neural connections that would become their language processing system.<sup>30</sup> The fact that people can become bilingual at various points throughout life shows, however, that the brain's best-fit matching networks are not hard-wired exclusively to one's mother tongue. It may even suggest that a completely different set of neural networks are involved for each language learned.

Sperber and Wilson's second principle, that the human mind is geared to achieve the greatest possible cognitive effect while exerting the smallest possible mental processing effort in a context of available assumptions, also seems compatible with the operation of best-fit matching neural networks as attested by the psycho-linguistic phenomenon of semantic priming. A subject is seated before a computer screen on which English words and nonsense words briefly appear and is asked to press a given key if the word is a recognized English word and a different key if it is not. Psychologists measure both the time required for this task as well as variations in time and accuracy under different conditions.<sup>31</sup> Both the speed and accuracy of this task can be improved by having the subject hear the word about the time the image of the word was flashed, a phenomenon known as priming. Priming has also been shown to be experimentally effective for words that were related in either sound or meaning to the word flashed on the screen. For instance, if the subject heard the word "rose" about the time the word "flower" was flashed, it increased the speed at which "flower" was recognized as an English word. What is more, even when the homonym "rose" as the past tense of "rise" was cued in a sentence that had nothing to do with flowers (e.g. "they all rose") recognition of the word "flower" came more quickly.

Such mental connections occur through active neural networks. There appears to be a stable connection pattern associated with each word, concept, and schema known. The activation of one neural network spreads into other networks for which connections have been previously established, whether they are based on phonetic form, visual form, or semantic meaning. This phenomenon of spreading activation of neural networks begins to point to how context enters the determination of meaning that is deducible from *both* the words uttered *and* the context together, but from neither alone. In fact, because neural activation is not a conscious process, one cannot avoid semantic priming that leads either to correct understanding or to misunderstanding in language comprehension, and that explains "Freudian slips" in spoken language and the repetition of words and syntax in first drafts of writing.

According to Sperber and Wilson, the human cognitive system is such that "our perceptual mechanisms tend automatically to pick out potentially relevant stimuli, our memory retrieval mechanisms tend automatically to activate potentially relevant assumptions, [and] our inferential mechanisms tend spontaneously to process them in the most productive way."<sup>32</sup> Therefore,

<sup>30</sup> Feldman, *Molecule to Metaphor* 76.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 87-91.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson and Sperber, "Relevance Theory" 611.

the word “relevance” in relevance theory refers to that goal of a mental process by which the meaning of an utterance forms in the mind through the subconscious process of spreading neural activation. The word should not be confused with its far more common sense of consciously deciding if a statement, once understood, is relevant to one’s interests or not.

After the brain has determined that a stimulus is language, processing continues by assigning referents to nouns and pronouns, disambiguating multiple senses of words, and enriching elements of the statement until comprehension is achieved. To illustrate, consider the sentence, “She doesn’t play here anymore.” The explicit words of this sentence are necessary for communication to occur, but they are insufficient for determining its meaning. A mental context must contribute information that is not coded within the sentence in order for it to be understood. To comprehend the meaning of that statement, the referent of the pronoun “she” must be identified (Is “she” a child? A tennis player? A musician?), the verb “play” must be disambiguated (Is it a child’s activity? A sport? A musical performance?), and the location “here” must be enriched from the physical context (Are we in a playground, a tennis court, or a concert hall?). The meaning of “anymore” must be attained through enrichment by previous knowledge. All of this information is accessed through the spreading activation of neural networks. As this example shows, comprehending any element of the statement is a parallel process involving mutually influential conclusions that develop within a mental context. For instance, to construe “play” as to play an instrument automatically determines “she” to be a musician. Feldman cites studies that show that “the brain is a massively parallel information processor” that is able to “retain multiple active possibilities for interpreting a sentence.”<sup>33</sup> It does, however, have a cut-off point “after which some possible interpretations are deemed so unlikely as to be not worth keeping active.” We experience surprise that can be delightful if in a joke but disconcerting if in a misunderstanding when the analysis needed for the statement turns out to be one that was previously deactivated as unlikely.

In order to account for the mental processing that produces comprehension, relevance theory postulates that for every concept known to a human mind there are three types of mental entries somehow represented within the brain. These categories should be understood as logical entities rather than a description of how they map onto the neural substrate. Since there is no scientific explanation of how the meaning of a word is represented in the brain, models such as Sperber and Wilson’s that answer to the general requirements of language processing are adequate for discussions such as this, even if they eventually need to be refined or scrapped because of subsequent new knowledge about how the brain represents and stores language.

Relevance theory posits that:

1. There is a lexical entry containing information about the word or phrase in one’s language used to express it along with syntactic and phonological

<sup>33</sup> Feldman, *Molecule to Metaphor* 308.

information about the word. This psychological construct is clearly language specific. The “Stoop effect” known in cognitive psychology which implies that “the brain does not separate words into form and meaning” seems to corroborate the existence of Sperber and Wilson’s lexical entry.<sup>34</sup> However, victims of aphasia present somewhat different evidence. For instance, the documentary on the widely publicized brain injury of ABC journalist Bob Woodruff showed him presented with a drawing of a pair of scissors. Although he could easily describe what scissors do, he could not remember the noun used to refer to the tool. However, once he was told the word “scissors” the connection between word and object was almost immediately re-established.

Moreover, the rules that allow the construction of morphology and syntax seem to operate apart from the string of symbols that comprise any given word. Psychologists test pre-school children by saying, “Here is a wug. Now there are two of them. So now here are two \_\_\_\_\_.” Invariably English-speaking children, even though never before hearing the word “wug,” will say “wugs.”<sup>35</sup> Their brains have already formed stable neural patterns for inflecting a noun into its plural but, contra Sperber and Wilson, they did not have a “lexical entry” for “wug” containing its syntactic and phonological information. Sperber and Wilson’s constructs may imply a more static model of representing language in the brain than neural theory suggests and may therefore need refinement.

2. Relevance theory posits a second type of entry in the mental context that is a set of logical deductive rules that apply to the set of relationships of which the given concept is a member. This entry facilitates the logical entailments that make communication a substantially inferential process. Sperber and Wilson contend that “the spontaneous and essentially unconscious formation of assumptions by deduction” is a key process that makes human communication a substantially inferential process.<sup>36</sup> The logical entry is that part of mental cognition that structures concepts into systems such that when one concept is invoked in a statement all other logically related concepts are automatically made available to the mental context in which comprehension of the statement occurs. Some logical deductive rules are relatively universal across speakers, cultures, and time but the relationships between some concepts may be culturally specific.

3. There is what Sperber and Wilson have called the encyclopedic entry in the human mind associated with each known concept that contains information used to enrich the concept. Encyclopedic entries vary from culture to culture, from person to person, and even throughout the lifetime of a given

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>35</sup> Pinker, *The Language Instinct* 127.

<sup>36</sup> Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, “Précis of Relevance: Communication and Cognition,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 10 (1987) 697–754.

person. Encyclopedic entries are open-ended as new information is added with time and life experience.

Feldman's ideas of schemas and cultural frames developed within a neural theory of language correspond loosely to Sperber and Wilson's logical and encyclopedic entries. Schemas are the universal, bodily-based representations of experience that are first formed in the human brain as an infant interacts with his or her physical environment. Feldman considers them the most primitive logical concepts upon which all later linguistic development occurs. "The embodied theory of meaning suggests that the child needs to have conceptual structures for understanding experiences before the words for labeling them can make sense."<sup>37</sup> An example of a schema Feldman considers universal is the notion of physical support, which gives rise to the associated roles of supporter and supported and, consequently, to a number of primitive concepts such as "on." Feldman finds most language to be highly metaphorical and considers such schemas to be the most basic types of knowledge upon which later more sophisticated meanings can be built. For instance, because a child learns early that she is often aided through physical support, at some later point in life the sentence "Support your local charities" becomes a sensible request for tangible aid.<sup>38</sup> Other universal schemas would include topological relationships, orientation (with respect to one's body), force-dynamic (e.g. "against"), and the source/path/goal schema. Feldman considers all universal schemas to be represented by one's neural connections that begin to develop even in the womb and that comprise universal and basic human knowledge which find expression in all languages, albeit in different lexical and syntactical forms.

Loosely corresponding to Sperber and Wilson's encyclopedic entry is Feldman's cultural frame which "is a collection of words, concepts, and relationships characterizing some domain of human experience that is not universal, such as baseball, biophysics, meditation, or the Eskimo hunting culture."<sup>39</sup> In contrast to all universal schemas that are expressible in any language, cultural frames may not be. The packaging of information into mental frames can differ markedly among languages, where "individuals' culture and conceptual systems, expressed through their *vocabulary*, do have a huge effect on the way they interact with each other and the world."<sup>40</sup> Cultural frames as defined by neural theory thereby account for the types of linguistic determinism observed by Whorf.

An individual word is connected to some number of schemas and/or cultural frames, such that all roles, relations, and actions associated with the word are simultaneously activated by a sensory perception of it. This activation of various associated neural networks forms the mental context

<sup>37</sup> Feldman, *Molecule to Metaphor* 135.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 201.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 189.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 189 (*italics original*).

within which meaning is determined by three three subtasks defined by Sperber and Wilson:<sup>41</sup>

1. Processing the explicit contents of a statement via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution, and other pragmatic enrichment processes to yield what are called the explicatures of the statement.
2. Determining the intended contextual assumptions, or the implicated premises.
3. Determining the intended contextual implications, that is, the implicated conclusions.

The inferential nature of the brain's language processing center seeks to preserve what it believes to be true because the mind will always begin to process a statement with previously formed and connected lexical, logical, and encyclopedic entries. This knowledge-conserving tendency of language processing is consistent with the best-fit matching networks of the brain, as language is processed by neural networks that have already been established and which constitute previous knowledge.

The spreading activation of neural networks that brings previously associated knowledge into the mental context within which meaning is determined means that comprehension (or miscomprehension) is achieved by a combination of what is explicitly said combined with inferences reached from other associations that have been activated by the statement. To illustrate, consider the statement, "He slipped on the wet floor and dropped the glass pitcher."<sup>42</sup> This statement communicates the proposition, "The pitcher is broken," even though those words are not explicitly stated. This point is inferred from encyclopedic knowledge that dropping an object means subjecting it to a gravitational acceleration downward terminated by an impact (a universal schema in Feldman's paradigm). The further encyclopedic knowledge gained from life experience that glass usually shatters on impact completes the inferential process needed to comprehend by inference the unstated, but intended, communication. The proposition that the pitcher broke is what relevance theory calls an implicature of the words actually said. Now, if the speaker did *not* mean to communicate that the pitcher broke, she would have to go on to say, "And amazingly the pitcher didn't break," to disconfirm the strongly associated inference.

This inferential nature of the psychological process of cognition is what makes humor, metaphor, innuendo, irony, double-entendre, and other delightful uses of language possible. It is at the same time what makes misunderstanding or the failure to communicate possible, because associated knowledge may be activated in the mind of the hearer or reader that introduces elements not intended by the speaker or author. Or the associated

<sup>41</sup> Wilson and Sperber, "Relevance Theory" 615.

<sup>42</sup> I am elaborating an example in Robin Setton, "A Pragmatic Theory of Simultaneous Interpretation" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Division of English/Applied Linguistics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997) 163.

knowledge presumed by the speaker may be missing altogether in the mind of the hearer. It is this constructive nature of human language processing that makes the deconstruction of language possible as well—for instance, by deliberately seeking a mental context that results in a construal of meaning intended to frustrate the speaker's or author's intent as evidenced by the implicated premises of the statement made.

Notice that an evasive or subversive use of language can be achieved by allowing an erroneous implicature to stand, the first instance of which occurred in the Garden of Eden. Psycholinguistic studies have shown that when people recall what they have heard or read, it is often the implicatures that they remember, but they often do not remember that this had *not* been explicitly stated.<sup>43</sup> Unless told otherwise, most people would believe that the statement discussed above meant that the pitcher was broken. This raises interesting issues for truth-telling and demonstrates how dishonest people can be wily with language and still claim that the words they explicitly said were true, even while the implicatures necessarily deduced from their statements were not. These psychological studies also show that *what is implied by language is just as much a part of the meaning communicated as what is explicitly said*. This raises a very complex problem in how to define fidelity for translations in general and for Bible translations in particular because the communicative clues that evoke necessary implicatures in one language must be transferred successfully to evoke equivalent implicatures in another. This means that simply plugging in the equivalent words more often than not will fail to preserve the implicatures intended by the original language to the extent that the cultural frames of the original audience differ from those of the target audience.

Because conversation or discourse is linear each subsequent statement affects the mental context by activating or shutting down neural networks in which meaning is being processed and thereby providing confirmation, contradiction or a strengthening of implicated premises that then become part of the psychological context in which the new information is processed. Consider the statement:<sup>44</sup>

(1) "I saw that gas can explode."

You will initially determine the meaning of that statement depending on whether "c-a-n" in your lexical entry for that sequence of letters is retrieved first as a noun or as a verb. Once your mind thinks it understands the statement, language processing stops. But then suppose the speaker goes on to say,

(2) "And it was a brand new can, too!"

The second utterance has a huge effect on your psychological cognitive context because your initial understanding of the first sentence will either be confirmed (if you took "c-a-n" to be a noun) or contradicted (if you took it to be

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 163, 222, referring to A. Garnham, *Mental Models as Representations of Discourse and Text* (Chichester: Ellis Horwood, 1987) 90–104.

<sup>44</sup> Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance* 184.

a verb). The second statement is essentially relevant to the communication process because it allows the hearer or reader to disambiguate the first statement, *even though the first statement would not have been thought ambiguous had the conversation ended there*. This example demonstrates that statements in sequence combine with premises to produce effects on the mental context that either

- 1) confirm the premise(s) used to determine meaning,
- 2) contradict the premise(s), or
- 3) strengthen, or
- 4) in some cases, have no effect (making the utterance irrelevant to the person who has heard or read the statement).

The cognitive effect that confirms or contradicts a premise changes your mental context, which you will then use to process the next statement of the conversation or text. The immediacy of spoken conversation allows for such corrective action, but misunderstandings invoked by a written text can be sustained indefinitely. If nothing else, relevance theory should make us wary about the ways in which a text can be misunderstood when its meaning is determined using associated knowledge in the mind of the reader that differs from that presumed by the author.

The inferential nature of language comprehension allows for the meaning of a statement to be carried *only* by implicated conclusions reached from what is explicitly stated. Here is an example of an actual communication event from the Jobs's household (told with my husband's permission) that illustrates how implication invoked by words may completely carry the intended meaning:

Karen, noticing an empty cheese wrapper on the kitchen counter:  
 "Did you finish the cheese last night?"

Buzz: "I have two more in the downstairs refrigerator."

Notice that Buzz's reply did not answer the question Karen explicitly asked, but because he is familiar with the communication patterns of his wife, it rather answered the question that he believed (rightly) was intended though only implied: "Should I put cheese on the shopping list?"

It is probably true that the higher the degree of communication intended by implication, the smaller the intended audience. It is no surprise that thirty years of communication patterns allow members of a family to communicate "below" (or "beyond") the surface of statements.

These two examples raise an important question about the difference in the way the mind disambiguates spoken language and written text. In fact, the spoken sentence "I saw that gas can explode" would be inflected differently by the intonation of voice to indicate whether "can" should be taken as a noun or a verb. The differences between what the auditory system contributes to understanding speech and what the visual system contributes to understanding text may be more significant than is currently acknowledged in the appropriation of relevance theory for text-based communication. And

the highly inferential dialogue about the cheese wrapper was communication intended for an audience of only two. These examples suggest that some caution may be prudent about applying a linguistic theory primarily based on conversation between two people to written texts. Virtually all of the examples given by Wilson and Sperber and by writers using their model involve conversation between two people. Clearly the intent to communicate to a wider audience in written form is not exactly the same kind of communication event.

While it may *seem* at first thought that language processing for any given language must involve activation of the same neural networks, and hence the same mental context within which meaning is determined, regardless of whether spoken or written, this is far from verifiably true. And there is some empirical counter-evidence. The fact that a person can competently speak and understand a language in which he or she is illiterate suggests a clear distinction in mental processing of spoken versus written language. Moreover, brain mapping of blood flow has demonstrated that four different parts of the brain are involved in seeing words, speaking words aloud, hearing words, and generating words, respectively.<sup>45</sup> This should suggest some caution in assuming that theories applicable to oral communication pertain equally as well to written texts.

On the other hand, one could argue that the four parts of the brain mapped during these different activities are related not to language processing per se but to the sensory mechanisms of vision, hearing, and speaking, and that the processing of language, whether spoken or written, happens at a lower substrate of neural activity common to all forms of linguistic input, whether heard or read.<sup>46</sup> The applicability of theories of language based on oral communication to understanding written texts awaits further advances in the cognitive sciences. Nevertheless, this should not stymie the effort, for theorists stand in a long tradition going back at least to the Greeks of building thought models centuries before scientific verification can confirm or disprove them. And so relevance theory should continue to be explored for its potential value furthering the conversation about the interpretation of written texts.

Moreover, written texts such as biblical narrative contain dialogue. Consider the dialogue found in John 2:4 between Jesus and his mother, when she requests that he do something about the lack of wine and he replies, “τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, γύναι. . . .” This statement is notoriously difficult to translate, not because the words are obscure (literally, “what to me and to you, woman?”) but because it invokes a cultural frame that is apparently unknown to the modern mind. Commentators can guess from context at its meaning in general terms, but John’s original readers probably did not have to give it a second thought because it was probably a commonly known idiom of that time.

<sup>45</sup> Feldman, *Molecule to Metaphor* 216.

<sup>46</sup> The further intriguing question as to whether language processing happens differently in a woman’s brain than in a man’s may also eventually have something to say about the application of relevance theory. See Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2006).

Although intended communication may rely in varying degrees on exploiting shared implicatures depending on the intended audience, setting, and literary genre, in fact, every communication of meaning normally involves something more than what is explicitly stated. People using the same language in the same culture apparently share enough common experience to have developed sufficiently common neural patterns, allowing implicatures to also be commonly shared to the extent that they can be intentionally but implicitly evoked by an author. But this raises the interesting and thorny question of whether and to what extent the implicated premises of the biblical source text—to the extent they can be known thousands of years after the original act of communication—should be made explicit in the translation of Scripture so they are not lost on today's reader.

Because translation between languages is also an act of linguistic communication, it should not be treated in isolation from the larger framework of sound linguistic and cognitive theory even as tentative as those theories may be. Broadly stated, the application of relevance theory to Bible translation requires that sufficient communicative clues that were linguistically signaled in the original language from which a reader in the source culture would infer necessary implicatures must be adequately represented in the translation. A rather simple example of this would be questions that expect a negative answer. This is signaled in a Greek question by the negative particle μή with a verb in the indicative mood. For accuracy such questions must be rendered in English in such a way that signals the author expected a negative answer, otherwise the intention of the author signaled by using that construction is lost on the reader of the translation.

Combining relevance theory with Toury's transfer postulate defines an *ideal* Bible translation that is faithful to the original language to be a translation that includes sufficient communicative clues to evoke a cognitive context from the targeted reader's lexical, logical, and encyclopedic entries in which *the same meaning will be derived as if that same reader were able to read the original language*. Note carefully that this goal does *not* imply a related hermeneutical claim that *today's reader* would ideally understand the passage just as an *original reader* would have. The role of Bible translation is to make the language barrier disappear, not to turn the mind of a modern twenty-first-century reader into that of a first-century Corinthian when she reads Paul's letter to that city. Most today would say the latter idea is impossible because to perfectly match the cultural frames of the biblical world one would actually have to live in that culture, and even people living at the same time in the same place still often misunderstand each other. But to give up completely on bringing modern readers into an understanding of the ancient biblical text that approximates how the original readers would have understood it yields too much to a radical reader-response hermeneutic.<sup>47</sup> It moreover violates a controlling belief that God created human

<sup>47</sup> Such issues are the essence of modern hermeneutics addressed, for instance, by Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." See Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids:

language to communicate *sufficiently* for his purposes and that furthermore, *he* chose to give his word in and through human language. We can be confident that language translation is adequately able to communicate sufficient knowledge of the original intent of Scripture to accomplish God's purposes, even if some phrases remain obscure or some referents cannot be satisfactorily known.

Therefore, the nuanced definition of the ideal Bible translation should be one that includes sufficient communicative clues to evoke a cognitive context that allows the reader to understand well enough to *respond* to the translation as if he or she were reading the original language. While this is still a daunting task, it does not demand that the language of the translation somehow evoke the *same* mental entities and replicate the *same* neural analysis as in the mind of the original readers, which would be impossible to know in the first place, much less verify. And so a modern reader of John 2:4, even the most highly educated biblical scholars, may never truly know exactly and fully what Jesus intended to communicate when he said, "τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, γύναι. . . ." However, that in no way prevents any reader from responding to the story of how Jesus revealed his glorious nature by changing water into wine.

Ernst-August Gutt is a Bible translator with Wycliffe-Germany who has worked on the mission field translating the Bible into an Ethiopian language. He has arguably more than anyone else to date explored the application of relevance theory to Bible translation in his published doctoral dissertation, *Translation and Relevance*.<sup>48</sup> Gutt concludes that a translation team must decide whether to produce what he calls a direct translation of the Bible, where few or none of the necessary implicatures of the source text are explicitly stated in the translation, or what he calls an indirect translation that would include additional material necessarily implied but not explicitly stated by the original language. He offers this comparison between a direct and an indirect translation of Matt 9:6.<sup>49</sup>

RSV (direct)

"But that you may know

that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sin"

Ifugao (indirect)

"But I will prove my speech to you. You know that it is God alone who removes sickness. You also know that it is God alone who forgives sin. And so, if I remove the sickness of this person and he walks, that's the proof

that I, the Elder sibling of all people, I also have the ability to forgive sin."

Zondervan, 1992); Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (2d ed.; Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 180.

—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, take up your bed and go home.” Jesus turned toward the paralytic and said, “Get up, take your stretcher and go to your (pl.) house!”

Notice that English translations produced for the western world are typically, like the RSV, more direct in their relationship to the original, whereas Bible translations into third world languages are typically more verbose. One wonders if this difference is because western culture has been shaped more by the Judeo-Christian tradition, providing a larger extent of shared implicatures evoked by biblical language than one finds in cultures where Christ is being introduced for the first time. This may also explain why some of the most popular English versions of the Bible are getting more verbose, for instance *The Message* or *The Amplified Bible*. As western culture becomes more secularized and pluralized it loses the knowledge of the Judeo-Christian tradition that made direct translations understandable. Readers today may need more of what is implicit in Scripture made explicit in order to understand it—an unfortunate effect of cultural change.

This implies that a transfer principle used by Bible translators in the 1950s, for instance, may no longer be adequate in the new millennium and that while faithfulness to the original must remain the paramount goal of Bible translation, measures of that goal may need to be reevaluated over time.

In his published lectures given in Zimbabwe in 1991 for the Triennial Translation Workshop, Gutt summarizes the value of relevance for Bible translation.<sup>50</sup> Because all translation must start with the translator’s interpretation of the original language, relevance theory provides “a much sharper tool for meaning analysis.”<sup>51</sup> It furthermore provides a more adequate understanding of translation problems by making translators more conscious of the “*contextual gap* between the context envisaged by the original communicator and that available to the target audience.”<sup>52</sup> Gutt offers as further insights from relevance theory an explanation of how implicit information is recovered, why there is implicit information in language processing, explanation of what it means for a translation to “make sense,” and why contextual information is crucial for the interpretation of utterances.<sup>53</sup>

Translators must always decide how much of original cultural color a translation should preserve, especially if it will be meaningless or misleading to the modern reader. For instance, Matt 26:20 contains reference to a Graeco-Roman practice of “reclining” (ἀνέκειτο) when eating as it introduces the story of the Last Supper. Since the English word “recline” is strongly associated in the minds of modern readers with relaxing in our La-Z-Boy recliners and not at all with eating at a table, the translator must decide whether to preserve it or to contextualize the term for today’s reader by using the term

<sup>50</sup> Ernst-August Gutt, *Relevance Theory: A Guide to Successful Communication in Translation* (Dallas: SIL/New York: United Bible Societies, 1992).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 30 (italics original).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 33–34.

that describes our posture at the table. Interestingly, the KJV translators chose to contextualize it for their audience: “Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve,” avoiding the reference to “recline.” The ESV agrees with the T/NIV in preserving the reference to the first-century practice:

“When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve.” (T/NIV)

“When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve.” (ESV)

The NRSV has perhaps the better reading that cuts between the two:

“When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve.”

Readers have their own personal preferences for such things, depending on whether they like the historical distance “reclining” introduces or whether they prefer a transparent reading, but neither case does violence to the text. However, the uninformed reader may spend time puzzling over “reclining” at a table and be distracted from reflecting on the more profound sense of Jesus’ last evening with his disciples. In terms of relevance theory, “reclining at the table” takes more mental processing effort because to “recline at a table” has no stable neural pattern for the English speaker, whereas to “sit at a table” requires minimal processing to achieve a positive cognitive effect. Translators guided by relevance theory would therefore opt for the rendering that minimizes mental processing effort.

Relevance theory (as well as other linguistic theories and practices such as speech-act theory and the best practice of bi-lingual quotation) allows the perennial debate among evangelicals about whether formal equivalence or functional equivalence most honors the evangelical doctrine of Scripture to be seen from a new perspective. Transfer principles, such as formal or functional equivalence, must be evaluated with reference to the target audience for which the translation is produced. The shared implicatures of an evangelical subculture that has a vast lexicon of its own jargon and the strongly associated concepts of those words may not be shared more widely in Christendom and much less by society at large. Even the needs of “evangelical” Christians in other cultures may require a transfer principle specific to their language and culture.

The extent to which formal equivalence can be achieved (where the syntactical form of the original Hebrew and Greek is preserved in translation) is very much a function of how the syntactic structures of the target language compare to that of *koiné* Greek and classical Hebrew. If formal equivalence is deemed the transfer principle that is most honoring to God’s inspired word, what about those languages whose structures do not allow anything close to it?

Even if the discussion is limited to English translations of the Bible, every one currently on the market is necessarily a mix of formal equivalence in places and functional equivalence in others. If formal equivalence could be ideally achieved, an isomorphic (“word-for-word”) translation would result, and the number of words in the translation would correspond closely to the number of words in the original. The more “dynamic” translations that do not make preservation of word order and syntax a necessary goal would be

expected to be more verbose. The simple measure of verbosity, which is the number of words in a translation in proportion to the corresponding words of the source text shows some surprising results:

Table 1. *The Verbosity of English Versions*<sup>54</sup>

Word count of the Hebrew Masoretic text: <sup>55</sup>	426,902 words
Word count of the Greek New Testament: <sup>56</sup>	118,300 words
Total:	545,202 words in the original languages

	# words	# words more in translation:	% larger than original:
original			
Hebrew & Greek:	545,202	—	—
NIV: <sup>57</sup>	726,133	180,931	33.18%
TNIV: <sup>58</sup>	728,393	183,191	33.60%
NLT: <sup>59</sup>	741,276	196,074	35.96%
ESV: <sup>60</sup>	757,439	212,237	38.93%
NKJV: <sup>61</sup>	770,430	225,228	43.31%
NASB: <sup>62</sup>	782,815	237,613	43.58%
ASV: <sup>63</sup>	784,668	239,486	43.93%
KJV: <sup>64</sup>	790,676	245,474	45.02%
NRSV: <sup>65</sup>	895,891	350,689	64.43%

<sup>54</sup> Verbosity is the ratio of the number of words in a translation compared to the number of words in its source text, in this case the Hebrew Masoretic text of the OT and the NA-27 edition of the Greek NT. Counted using Accordance 6.9.2. (Copyright 2006 Oaktree Software, Inc.). Prepared by Karen H. Jobes, Ph.D. Bibleworks yields slightly different word counts but the same relative proportions. In Bibleworks, the ESV is 30,344 words larger than the TNIV.

<sup>55</sup> Groves-Wheeler Westminster Hebrew Morphology (Release 3.5) ©1991, 1994, 1999, 2001 Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA, USA. Text used by permission of the United Bible Society, based on the Michigan-Claremont-Westminster machine-readable text. Version 3.1.

<sup>56</sup> *Greek New Testament* (Nestle-Aland, 27th edition, second printing). *The Greek New Testament*, edited by Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, Fourth Revised Edition. Copyright © 1966, 1968, 1975 by United Bible Societies, 1983, 1994 by the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001. The GRAMCORD Institute. Version 3.6.

<sup>57</sup> *New International Version* (NIV). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Version 1.5.

<sup>58</sup> *The Holy Bible, Today's New International Version* (TNIV). Copyright © 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society. Copyright © 2005 by The Zondervan Corporation. Version 1.0.

<sup>59</sup> *New Living Translation*. Holy Bible, New Living Translation copyright © 1996 owned by Tyndale Charitable Trust. Version 2.3.

<sup>60</sup> *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Version 1.2.

<sup>61</sup> *New King James Version*. Copyright © 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc. Version 2.3.

The “essentially literal” ESV is surprisingly more verbose than the NIV, the TNIV, and even the NLT! My point is not that the ESV should be thought less faithful to the original language of Scripture than the T/NIV (or vice versa), but that the polarities of formal versus functional equivalence, though perhaps useful in their day, do not do justice to how language works and how translations accurately communicate the meaning of the source text into a language whose grammatical and syntactical structures differ from those of the source text. The fidelity of a translation to the original language cannot be adequately evaluated by pitting formal and functional equivalence against each other.<sup>66</sup> In fact, relevance theory substantiates that every *accurate* translation *must* include features that resemble both formal equivalence and functional equivalence at various places throughout the text depending on the degree of congruence between the linguistic structures of the languages involved and the differences between the lexical, logical, and encyclopedic entries of the authors of Scripture and those of the reader in any given modern language and culture.

There is much about language that is beautifully mysterious, but when all is said and done its efficacy in accomplishing the purposes of God cannot be doubted:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Isa 55:10, 11 (TNIV)

<sup>62</sup> *New American Standard Bible*. Copyright ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, by The Lockman Foundation. Version 1.3.

<sup>63</sup> *American Standard Version* of 1901. This text is in the public domain and has no copyright. The electronic version of this text has been analyzed and corrected by OakTree Software, Inc. Version 1.5.

<sup>64</sup> *King James (Authorized) Version*. This text is in the public domain and has no copyright. The electronic version of this text has been analyzed and corrected by OakTree Software, Inc. Version 1.6.

<sup>65</sup> *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. Copyrighted, 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, Version 2.5.

<sup>66</sup> As for instance, Grudem, “Are Only Some Words”; and Ryken, *The Word of God in English*.