The Use of Translational English in Theological Compositions for More Effective Communication: Some Basic Considerations

Ernst R. Wendland
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

This pedagogical study seeks to address the practical problem of communication in English when composing or providing theological literature for non-first-language readers. This includes materials on important biblical topics, current teaching resources, or Bible translations to be used as a source text. This article identifies some major problem areas that have been identified for composing theological works. It also proposes some strategies for using translational English to deal with them. A translational English text is an original or re-composed text that is not only more understandable in English but also more readily rendered in a non-Western language (e.g., Chichewa). At the end of the article, the reader has a chance to apply these principles and procedures. They are supplied with a short sample text from a recent popular missiological book, intended for translation in Malawi, to critique. The aim is to foster a frank discussion of these issues and to encourage concerted efforts either to develop new or to seek out existing literature that will communicate more effectively—that is, with greater ease and overall comprehension, whether orally or in writing.

About the Author
Ernst R. Wendland earned a B.A. in Biblical Languages from Northwestern College (USA), an M.A. in Linguistics and a Ph.D. in African Languages and Literature from the University of Wisconsin, and a Master of Sacred Theology from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Ernst lived in Zambia from 1962 until his retirement in 2022 from his teaching position at Lusaka Lutheran Seminary (since 1968). A former UBS Translation Consultant in Zambia, he still serves (since 1999) as Professor Extraordinary in the Department of Ancient Studies at Stellenbosch University and as Adjunct Professor (thesis supervisor-examiner) at South African Theological Seminary and three other graduate schools. Ernst is on the editorial/review board of several academic journals. His research and writing interests include various aspects of Bible translation as well as structural, stylistic, poetic, and rhetorical studies in biblical texts and the Bantu languages of South-Central Africa.

erwendland@gmail.com

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

1. Introduction

This study is the product of my thoughtful consideration of the theory and practice of translation along with its application to the communication setting and circumstances of South-Central Africa.[1] The aim is to compose a communicative text that will best serve the needs and capacities of a specific primary receptor (or consumer) group. Often, such a text will be a meaning-oriented, *functional* equivalence version in a local language (Nida and de Waard 1986). This means that our translation efforts will be directed toward reproducing in this receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message in terms of the semantic *content* and the pragmatic *aims* of the original text. These parameters would be determined by the situational context and applied by using the linguistic forms that are most natural, even idiomatic, in the vernacular language.

The activity of translation is one important type of communicative activity, but in this article, I want to take a step back in the overall message transmission process to consider the various *source texts* that are often employed in theology and related disciplines. There are two important questions to consider. First, how easily can they be understood by non-mother-tongue speakers? Second, how readily can they be expressed in a non-Western language? Thus, I will focus on the challenge of preparing translation-oriented adaptations of Christian literature (from Bible tracts to theological textbooks) in a source language, like English. (Similar problems ought to be found in, for example, Afrikaans, Portuguese, or Spanish.) This process of re-composition should be the first step taken in the process of producing any meaningful rendering in another language. Thus, if the original author does not take it upon himself to write in a simplified, straightforward manner, then it will be left to the teacher or translator first to convert the message into such a form before they can begin to translate meaningfully and produce a natural expression of the text in the receptor language.

It is a fundamental principle of composition literature that authors, no matter what type of literature they are producing, must continually keep their potential readers in mind as they progress. This is the only way to ensure the effective communication of the desired message. Thus, it is essential for those who are developing theological materials for use here in Africa to shape their message specifically to suit the specific needs of their primary readership. This is true, whether the message will be received in English or translated into one of the vernacular languages. Here I am not thinking so much of the *content* of the message, which centers on the timeless, unchangeable Good News of salvation through Christ Jesus. Rather, it is the *method* of bringing this living message in a way that is most relevant and understandable to people today that I have in mind. I believe that to convey this message most effectively in a non-Western setting, authors will need to significantly alter and adapt the style and manner of writing that they were accustomed to using in the West, when addressing those who share their own culture and theological background.

To fill this need, this article provides some steps for simplifying English so that African readers can comprehend it more easily, especially those leaders who may depend on such material to carry out their ministry. In the following pages, I will describe and illustrate some practical guidelines that will hopefully serve to aid in the composition or adaptation of texts

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in the form of *translational*[2] English.[3] By this I mean a style that is not only restructured and simplified to increase the understanding of English readers but also, more importantly, a form of English that more readily lends itself to an accurate and meaningful translation into a local African language. The potential range of source materials is vast. These could include theological textbooks, sermons, Bible studies, tracts, topical journals, newsletters, popular Christian literature, transcripts of podcasts or radio shows, and even the Bible itself.

2. Analysis and Expansion

2.1 Analysis of the persons, events, qualifiers, and relations

To start with, there is a set of procedures one can follow when analyzing an English source text to render it more *translatable* into a receptor text (see Nida & Taber 1982, ch. 3):

First, transform as many as possible of the event nouns (E) of the source text into verbal constructions that can serve as the central core of simple (kernel) clauses one event per kernel clause; (e.g., salvation > save). Then make the relationships of all animate participants (P) and inanimate

objects (O) to every Event explicit (visible) within each clause as subject/agents, objects, and adjunct nouns (e.g., *Christ* saved us). Next, make sure the relationship of all qualifiers (Q, e.g., adjectives and adverbs) to participants and/or the central Event Nouns of a kernel clause are clearly indicated. Finally, check to see that all the relations (R) are explicitly expressed to link the kernel clauses to each other within every paragraph of the source text. This will involve a careful analysis of all conjunctions (e.g., although, since, in order to) and prepositional phrases. Possessive pronouns (e.g., my, his, their) and genitive (i.e., of) constructions also need to be made explicit. (E.g., his death > he died, hardness of heart > he is stubborn).

The resultant transformed text will probably sound more "redundant" to first-language speakers since the implicit meaning has been stated more explicitly than is necessary for them. The process whereby such redundancy (overt content) is built into a text involves what are termed *expansions*. There are two basic types of expansion: *syntactical* (form) and *semantic* (lexical).

2.2 Syntactical expansions

Some of the more common *syntactical* expansions, which build upon the principles listed above, are as follows:

1) Recast *abstract* nouns that represent events as finite verbs. This necessitates making the personal participants (the actor, object, experiencer, or goal) explicit through the use of nouns and pronouns. (E.g., his goodness > God is good.)

2) Recast *passive* verbs as *active* ones. This usually requires that the implicit participants be made explicit. (E.g., we are justified > God justifies[4] us.)

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2 In technical terms, *translational* English would be an example of *intra*linguistic translation, which refers to the transforming of a source text in one language into a different text in the same language. The result is often termed paraphrasing, or rewording. This is to be distinguished from an interlinguistic translation, which refers to the rendering of a source text from one language into a *different* language. This terminology derives from the seminal article by Roman Jakobson (1959, 233).

3 Some resources that inspired the development of translational English include Azar and Hagen (2021), Barnwell (2022a; 2022b), Björkman (2013), Chaplin (1966), de Jong (2020), Hibbs and Reilly (2018), Lachance (2023), Loewen (1981), Nida and Taber (1982), Nida and de Waard (1986), Pierson, Dickerson, and Scott (2010), Smith (2022), Wendland (1998, 2018), and Wonderly (1968).

4 The verb *justify* may need to be simplified (e.g., judges us as righteous).

3) Identify all participants unambiguously by substituting noun forms for pronouns in cases where the use of the latter leaves the antecedent ambiguous or not quickly identifiable, especially when writing direct or indirect speech. (E.g., he said that he already gave *him* the money > he said that he already gave *his father* the money.)
4) Clarify the objects and events that are associated with *abstract nouns*. (E.g., know the truth > know the true message.)
5) Indicate ambiguous genitive (of) relationships more specifically. (E.g., the gift of God> the blessing that God gives.)
6) Fill out any ellipses. (E.g., he didn't want to > ... *go* with me to town.)

2.3 Semantic expansions

The most common *semantic* expansions may be carried out in three different ways. As illustrated below, these various semantic or lexical expansions are often employed when cultural and specialized or other technical information is present in the source text.

1) *Classifiers* can be used whenever an unfamiliar word needs some extra (redundant) meaning attached to it so that the reader can know the function of the word. (E.g., *town* Nazareth, linen *cloth*, *religious group* Pharisees, Jordan *river*.)
2) *Descriptive substitutes* involve the use of explanatory phrases or clauses to describe the function of the object or event in question. (E.g., synagogue > Jewish teaching house, crucify > put to death by nailing a person to a wooden cross, Temple > large worship house of the Jews.)
3) *Semantic restructuring* brings out the fuller meaning to prevent misunderstanding. (E.g., I am a *jealous* God > I am a God who demands that my people love nothing else more than me.)

The above is a brief survey of some of the more common techniques that are used to increase redundancy and prevent overloading a message.

In the next section, a variety of lexical adjustments are described that aim to increase the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the communication process, whether oral or written. The goal is to produce meaningful texts of high quality that also communicate more successfully with those whose first language is not English.

3. Using a Translational Vocabulary

Different testing procedures have shown that vocabulary-related factors tend to produce relatively great difficulty for inexperienced readers, while factors related to sentence structure and grammar cause problems even for advanced readers. The vocabulary of persons with limited knowledge of English, unless they continue their learning by furthering their education or by extensive reading, remains restricted to the words they hear and use in their immediate sociocultural group. As a result, they cannot access the full lexical resources of the language, and indeed they often experience great difficulty in correctly understanding the oral or written speech of those outside their educational class or who are less restricted in their geographical movement. This being the case, it is useful for writers to keep in mind certain principles of vocabulary usage as they develop materials in translational English for such a reading constituency. Note that these guidelines and the examples used may need to be modified in keeping with the local receptor community for whom they are intended, whether in English or another vernacular language, like Chichewa (Malawi),[5] Chibemba (Zambia), or Chishona (Zimbabwe), the major languages of Sout-East Africa.

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5 Chichewa has many second-language speakers in all three countries, making it a lingua franca of the area.

3.1 Potential problem points

First, one must learn to recognize and classify certain potential problem points as far as vocabulary is concerned. Then, one should try either to avoid these when writing if possible or to adapt them to constructions that are easier to process conceptually. The following is a listing of the more common types of potential problem points.

3.1.1 Theological terms

Many words and expressions have been retained in our religious literature because, for theologically educated readers at least, they are assumed to preserve specific biblical meanings that parallel those of the corresponding words in the original Hebrew and Greek. To the untrained reader, however, many of these theological terms have little or no meaning until they are carefully explained. (E.g., righteousness, justification, grace, propitiation, sanctification, inspiration, contrition.) Another problem is that, over time, some of these formerly religious words have changed in common use to mean something different from what they originally denoted. (E.g., justify, believe, charity, grace, cross.)

3.1.2 Words that have special meanings in religious contexts

Some words are well known, but their biblical or religious meaning differs from their ordinary meaning, which might confuse people. These words include calling God *jealous*, references to the *election* of God's people or *visiting* the iniquity, and using *ashes* to signify repentance, *saints* for ordinary believers, or *church* for a congregation in worship.

3.1.3 Culturally distinctive terms

These are words that name objects and events peculiar to the culture of biblical peoples but are known today only to persons who have been educated on the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman background of the Bible. (E.g., Pharisee, Passover, synagogue, cubit, talent, Baal, camel). Terms that are characteristic of a modern Western way of life may be just as difficult to understand for those who have never experienced or even heard of these. (E.g., freezer, motel/lodge, legislature, internet, insurance, basketball, sidewalk, gym, escalator, shopping mall, satellite.)

3.1.4 Words peculiar to a certain dialect

Certain words of a widely spoken language such as English may be peculiar to or used only by people from specific countries or areas. This can lead to difficulty in understanding or complete misunderstanding when the same words are used in a different area. (E.g., corn, truck, church service, can, flashlight, movie, gas, trunk, baseball.)

3.1.5 Obsolete and archaic words

Some English words that were once in common use (and made memorable in the King James Bible) have become archaic and now are seldom, if ever, utilized except in religious contexts. (E.g., transgression, fetters, prevent, alms, tribulation, iniquity, blaspheme, affliction, consummation.)

3.1.6 High-level words

High-level words are those that are not known or simply not used by speakers of limited English ability and with limited educational background. (E.g., cleanse, wrath, grant, beseech, purchase, distress, precepts.)[6]

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6 Some of these may also be placed under §3.1.5.

3.1.7 Abstract terms

These are more difficult for readers of any language to understand. This could be because they are vaguer, indefinite, and hard to pin down, sometimes even in context (e.g., matter, thing, affair, means, like, hope). Another possible reason is that their meaning depends primarily on personal perception (e.g., beauty, truth, goodness, happiness, contentment) rather than physical attributes that are tangible, material, and concrete.

3.1.8 Figurative language

Broadly speaking, figurative speech is an elaboration or embellishment of language that involves taking individual words or longer expressions and using them with unconventional or non-literal meanings. Such figurative elaborations frequently serve to make communication more vivid and interesting. However, figurative language could easily fall flat, for example, when a foreigner naively tries to transfer a metaphor or any other figure of speech from their own cultural context to another.

Thus, all metaphors, similes, metonyms, and so forth are questionable in the sense that they may not be known to speakers who live in a different cultural setting. Furthermore, some words in English are used in a figurative, often biblical sense,[7] which is difficult for those with a limited command of a language to grasp. (E.g., fox for a clever person, pillars meaning leaders, fall asleep in place of die, seed in the sense of descendants.)

3.1.9 Technical terms

These are words that are characteristic of a certain craft, trade, science, profession, art, or branch of learning. Consequently, they are not known or understood by those with limited education and reading experience. (E.g., metaphor, chiasmus, inclusio, discourse, genealogy, incarnation, apocalypse, election, eschatology, dogmatics.)

3.1.10 Semantically complex terms

These words, on the surface at least, often appear to be rather straightforward, but upon further examination, they reveal a more complex structure of meaning. This complexity may be due to several factors. Other complex words have a wide area of meaning with many individual semantic components all included under one term. For the proficient reader, this is no problem since these different meanings are usually distinguishable by the context. (E.g., bank, level, part, park, lock, band, draw, drive, mean.) But for inexperienced readers, words like this present real problems. These readers will not know all the possible semantic senses and since they tend to read word-by-word they lose the benefit of context to help them figure out the desired meaning.

As noted earlier, an *event* noun causes problems in virtually every language. Such a word is semantically complex because it consists of a quality or a verbal action (or event) that has been recast into a nominal form. Consequently, the word's grammatical classification does not correspond to the real-life phenomenon to which it refers. This complicates comprehension for inexperienced readers. (E.g., deliverance, redemption, humility, holiness, satisfaction, trust.)

This particular class of words will be considered in greater detail below when I deal with grammatical problems because quite a bit of structural and even co-textual adjustment is usually necessary in order to express their meaning more clearly and naturally.

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[7] Those in §3.1.1 and §3.1.5 also apply here.

3.2 Several strategic solutions

Having pointed out the more common causes of difficulty regarding vocabulary usage, I now list some basic compositional procedures that can aid writers and adapters in solving these and similar vocabulary problems.

3.2.1 Use of commonly known words

Familiar terms when used in their normal contexts (depending on the specific English dialect) lead to increased readability and comprehension of a given passage. (E.g., bear > carry, remain > stay, precept > command, speak > say, beseech > ask, invoke > pray.) This does not mean that high-frequency words must always be used, because they could also be ambiguous. For example, headache and shoulder are not high-frequency words, but any user of English easily understands them because they are *concrete*. That is, they can easily be visualized or experienced. On the other hand, certain abstract expressions, like matter, business, and amazing, are used frequently but they are not always easy to understand because of their wide range of usage.

3.2.2 Familiar combinations (collocations)

Word familiarity and word frequency are not the only matters that complicate understanding. The combination of words and their context also plays a role. Well-known combinations of words that are semantically compatible and that are used in specific contexts are more easily understood than rare and unusual combinations. On the other hand, combinations of words that are not used in their usual sense (primary meaning) may set up a collocational clash, and sound strange and unnatural to inexperienced readers. For example, the expression he *fell* at his feet might be taken to mean that he tripped over his feet and fell down, which its primary sense suggests. This could be changed to He bent down to the ground at his feet. Consider also the following suggestions: God's word has *come* > he heard God's word, your *work* of faith > you put your faith into practice; he will *see* death > he will die,[8] *know* love > know what love means, *saw* their faith > recognized that they believed.

Thus, writers should continually ask themselves, Is this word, or group of words, one that envisioned readers will recognize as familiar and make sense of in this context? One must work toward the use of word combinations that will be recognized as natural and therefore easy to read and understand while avoiding lexical combinations that are novel for the sake of special effect (e.g., fortunate mistake, grateful experience, fat idea, unhappy plan) or that are unusual expressions found in traditional English religious literature patterned after the KJV. For example, in order to achieve a more direct and natural expression, it may be necessary to reverse a verb. This means to shift to another verb that has the opposite meaning, but one more appropriate to the context. (E.g., which you *heard* from me > that I *told* you about, what do you have that you have not *received* > hasn't God given you everything you own?)

3.2.3 Prefer words currently in use

This point is particularly relevant to theologically trained persons who have likely been exposed to this type of vocabulary from childhood or through contact with a more literal version of the Bible.[9] They may have even memorized large portions of it. No doubt a great deal of the theological literature that they had to read and study during their religious education was also characterized by this type of language, which may be clear enough to them but is often unknown even to educated speakers of

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8 *Pass away* or another local euphemism could also be used.
9 Traditionally this was the KJV, but nowadays the same is true for the ESV.

English. (E.g., quick > living, let > hinder, conversation > behavior, suffer > allow, knowest > know.)

3.2.4 Prefer specific over generic terms

As long as they are within the domain of the general cultural interest or experience of your readers (e.g., maize, gardens, rain, cattle, football), specific terms are easier to understand than more generic ones. But if you are dealing with an unfamiliar, technical, or specialized field (e.g., internet, computers, medicine, astronomy, space travel—even systematic theology), more general terms are often easier to grasp than specific ones. On the other hand, many English *collective* nouns and other generic terms must often be made more specific by using either a qualifying word or a phrasal expansion to avoid any misunderstanding and to bring out the intended meaning. (E.g., God gave his *Law* > Ten Commandments to Moses, Jesus saves us from our *sin* > sins, *man* is > people are sinful.)

As one aims for maximum intelligibility when writing, a process that often involves some type of *simplification* or *clarification* in vocabulary, word usage, and grammar, it is important not to go to the other extreme and simplify too much. For example, in the case of vocabulary, one might think that the more generic and general a term is (e.g., thing, go, come, good, bad) the more easily it will be understood. As already noted, this is not always the case, and the overuse of such words can lead to colorless ambiguity and drab, lifeless writing with little exactness of meaning. For example, rather than using *good*, use generous for a person, well-constructed for a house, obedient for a dog, and productive for a farm. The aim is to maintain a proper *balance* between specific and generic terminology while keeping the general context, the subject matter, and the average ability of the readers in mind.

3.2.5 Central meaning of words

Avoid using a common word with a sense that is rare, unfamiliar, or figurative since this may lead to confusion and misunderstanding, especially for readers who are not accustomed to Western manners of expression. (E.g., *lord* it over someone, *table* the request, innocent *party*, *sweep* away the enemy, a *grave* situation, earn your *keep*.) Rather, one should try and stick to the central meaning of words. Use a word with the sense most widely known and familiar to those with a limited English vocabulary. Also consider the sociocultural setting in which they are living, which may differ from one region of Africa to the next and even from one part of a country to another.

3.2.6 Provision of contextual conditioning (lexical expansion)

To provide contextual conditioning means to modify the verbal setting through lexical-semantic expansions to state more explicitly the intended meaning of unfamiliar terms that are difficult to understand. This prevents *overloading* the message to such an extent that the reader has little chance of comprehending it correctly. There are two important ways of furnishing such contextual conditioning:

a) Descriptive phrases: When changing a text to be more understandable, it is often necessary to use synonymous expressions. Not pure synonyms in the sense of belonging to the same semantic class, but words whose overall *content* is synonymous even though they may belong to different parts of speech. This in turn usually involves recasting or semantically restructuring the entire phrase or sentence so that the high-level or unfamiliar word is *substituted* by an explanatory phrase on the more common level of usage. The goal is to provide a co-textual basis for comprehending the meaning and significance of the more difficult word or

concept. In other situations, the unfamiliar term may be retained, but an appositional descriptive phrase is used along with it on the first occurrence and thereafter at periodic intervals until the reader has acquired the meaning.

An unfamiliar word, especially if it is prominent in the discourse, needs this type of semantic redundancy (contextualized meaning) attached to it so that the untrained reader will be able to understand something about its form and/or function. *Form* has to do with (i) any feature or characteristic of a physical object (size, shape, quantity, color, taste, substance), or (ii) a description of any activity involving movement. *Function* then refers to the purpose or significance of an object or action. This is a particularly helpful solution in cases where theological, cultural, and other technical or foreign terms are involved. Ones that are likely to be unfamiliar to or misunderstood by the average reader. In these cases, explanatory terms that make sense in English to readers in a particular area, or that can be rendered easily into a local African language, are the ideal. (E.g., *repent* > turn away from your sins, *transgression* > disobeying God's laws, *blaspheme* > to speak wickedly against God, *unfaithful* > they do not keep (their) promises, *synagogue* > teaching house of the Jews, *island* > an area of land surround by water, *sickle* > a curved piece of iron for harvesting grain, *wine* > fermented drink made from grapes.)

b) Qualifiers: There is another, closely related method of dealing with proper names, culturally unfamiliar or technical terms, or words that are in common enough use to be understood, but which the reader might interpret in a sense different from the meaning intended. One can add a short qualifier or else modify the context to indicate the correct meaning or to exclude the incorrect one. This is a basic principle of all clear writing (and translation as well). No potential ambiguity should be left in the

text. The use of such qualifiers, as in the case of descriptive phrases, does not add to the content of the message so long as it is limited to making information explicit that is already linguistically or contextually implicit in the original words (E.g., his passion > the suffering of Christ, weak *in their faith*, washed his hands to *demonstrate that he is innocent*, tore his mantle *to show his anger, large animals called* camels, *the river* Nile, the city of Damascus, the Mediterranean *large lake*). Note that in the case of a re-telling or an adaptation of some written source, it is legitimate to incorporate such additional material to *localize* or *contextualize* the message for a specified purpose or setting of communication.

3.2.7 Specify the relevant semantic component

Many words, especially philosophical and theological terms, are semantically complex. Instead of standing for comparatively simple ideas, they involve two or more main components of meaning. Even seemingly simple, concrete words (e.g., block, lock, ring, beat) may have numerous senses or semantic components that are defined by the textual context in which they appear. In such cases, usually, just one of these components is primarily intended. Thus, to avoid ambiguity, it is often best to choose a descriptive or explanatory phrase or even just a one-word equivalent that conveys only *one* of the semantic components of the original word, taking care to select the particular feature that is in focus in the given context.

Here are a few examples from NT Greek.[10] The noun σάρξ (flesh), could mean sinful desires or the human body. The verb εὐλογέω (bless), could mean (i) to praise, speak well of, give thanks, when God is the goal, or (ii) to be gracious to, provide with benefits, when God is the actor and man is the

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10 These have been suggested by a reading of Nida and Taber (1982, 56-90).

goal. The noun δόξα (glory) has three main semantic components: splendor, greatness, and honor. The noun χάρις (grace) includes many different aspects of meaning that could refer to God's favor, kindness, undeserved love, mercy, privilege, generosity, blessing, but never all at once in a biblical context.

3.2.8 Words contextually appropriate to the constituency

Finally, to evaluate whether vocabulary is appropriate, one needs to consider the particular consumer group to which the literature is directed. This implies, of course, that you must try as much as possible to *get to know* the people for whom you are writing—their manners of expression, customs, lifestyle, social and religious values, worldview, needs, goals in life, and other important sociocultural factors. When communicating with an unknown and unseen reader group it will be nearly impossible to succeed in this communicative effort. But for many societies in Africa, until there is a theologically trained, indigenous ministry that can fully assume the production and assessment of Christian literature, we will have to depend on the creative contextual adaptation and translation of available materials deemed helpful and useable so that the Word of God, the Gospel message in particular, may be conveyed in a way that is accurate, understandable, relevant, and *translatable* in the local culture and society.

4. Structural (Grammatical) Adjustments

I will proceed on two levels when dealing with the grammatical or structural adjustments that are necessary when writing in translational English. First, I will expand upon the previous study of lexical problems and concentrate on certain types of words and phrases that involve grammatical difficulties and ambiguities in compositions and offer suggestions for how these may be meaningfully restructured. Second, I will widen the scope somewhat and consider various factors involved in producing straightforward clauses and sentences.

4.1 Words and phrases

The adjustments highlighted below are given to suggest ways of guiding authors or text adapters toward writing (or translating) in a more straightforward style. Such a text will have the structure carefully organized to clarify the relationships between constituent elements, whether these be words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or even entire discourse units.

The so-called genitive case (*of* constructions) is perhaps the greatest source of grammatical ambiguity in English. Though the genitive construction (noun + of + noun) is generally thought to have a single meaning, it actually covers the widest range of meaningful relationships between words in English as well as in Hebrew and Greek. Thus, this syntactic formation can *mean* many different things depending on which nouns are involved and how they are semantically related to each other in a particular context. Therefore, when writing translational English (or when translating from an English text), one should try to avoid the genitive construction whenever the reader (or listeners) might misunderstand. In such instances, our efforts must be directed toward discovering, and then clearly stating exactly what the semantic relation is in each case. This should be done, rather than following the path of least resistance and simply writing or translating sentences literally or in the way that is typical for religious/theological literature, including that of the New Testament epistles. The procedure for carrying out this process may be summarized as follows:

After a careful study of the total context, analyze and note the constituent semantic parts of a genitive (X of Y) phrase. You need to

determine whether you are dealing with participants (P), objects (O), events (E), qualities (Q), relations (R), or various combinations of these.[11] After noting the specific semantic components involved, it is essential to determine the precise interrelationships of the various components in context, and finally to state them unambiguously by using a grammatical *transformation* (kernel-clause expression). This makes the intended meaning explicit and eliminates any other possible meanings. Here is an example to illustrate this procedure: With *the will of God* in Ephesians 1:1 the noun *will* refers to an event (E) and God is the participant (P). This can be transformed to God wills (O).[12]

The following tables illustrate many possible interpretations for the ambiguous genitive construction along with suggested ways of transforming it into a more precise and understandable expression. The classification indicates the meaningful relationships between components X and Y, which respectively precede and follow *of*. In the first column of the table below the *formula* that indicates the relationship is given. The second column gives a *literal example* which is characteristic of many traditional theological writings (i.e., two nouns joined by of). The third illustrates a possible *transformation* of the literal example which is more meaningful and portrays the formula given in the first column.

Formula	Example	Transformation
Y is associated with X	Day of wrath (Rom 2:5)	Day when God's anger will be revealed

X is associated with Y	Door of faith (Acts 14:27)	Opened the way for non-Jews to believe
Y qualifies X	Father of glory (Eph 1:17)	Glorious Father
X qualifies Y	Wisdom of words (1 Cor 1:17)	Wise way of speaking
Y is the goal of X	Knowledge of God (Col 1:10)	To know about God
X is the goal of Y	Object of his desire (Luke 10:6)	That which he desires
X is the causative agent of Y	God of peace (Phil 4:9)	God who gives peace
X is the causative goal of Y	The peace of God (Phil 4:7)	The peace (or reconciliation) that God brings (or gives)
X is the direct agent of Y	Children of disobedience (Eph 5:6)	People who disobey
Y is the direct agent of X	love of God (Titus 3:4)	God loves
Y is in apposition to X	Temple of His body (John 2:21)	Temple which is his body

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11 See §2.1 above.
12 The object might be for something else (E) to happen.

X is related to Y	I am of Paul (1 Cor 1:12)	I follow Paul
X is from Y	Jesus of Nazareth	Jesus who comes from Nazareth
X is part of Y	City of Galilee	City in the province of Galilee
Y possesses X	The house of John	The house that John owns/where John lives
X contains Y	Basket of grain	Basket that contains grain

Table 1. Diverse semantic examples that illustrate the genitive construction.

A class of expressions closely related to the preceding genitive constructions is the *possessive* construction. This provides even more striking contrasts in the relationship between the syntactic elements of the construction, as the following examples illustrate. Note that the symbol Z specifies a personal participant that is implied but not explicitly named in the context.

Example	**Transformation**	**Formula**
his (P) sins (E)	He sins	X does Y

His (P) destruction (E)	Z destroys him	Z does Y to X
His (P) calling (E)	He (God) calls (him)	X does Y to Z
His (P) glory (Q)	He is glorious	X is Y
His (P) way (O)	He (travels on) the way	X goes on Y (travels)
His (P) burden (O)	He (lays) a burden (on) Z	X lays something on Z
His (P) burden (O)	Z (lays) a burden (on) him	Z lays something on him
His (P) God (O)	He (worships) God	X worships Y
His (P) arm (O)	He (has) an arm	Y is a part of X
His (P) house (O)	He (owns) a house	X owns/possesses Y

Table 2. Diverse semantic examples that illustrate the possessive construction.

In phrases like those illustrated in the two preceding tables, I note that there is little difficulty involved if an object or person (P) is related to an event (E) or a quality (Q) since these relationships are clearly indicated in the resulting kernel expression. More difficulty arises, however, in trying to determine the precise semantic relationships between and among syntactically linked sets of objects or participants. These may be connected by several different, often implicit events. Problems also arise when more

than one *of* construction is closely linked to another. In such cases, it is often left to the literary *co-text*, or even the extralinguistic *context*, to clarify or indicate more precisely what is meant and how the participants and qualities are associated semantically with each other. However, for the inexperienced reader, this background usually is not sufficient. Therefore, it is up to the writer (translator) to indicate the exact relationships explicitly in the text, as the above transformations exemplify.

The preceding discussion and examples show that even the simplest expressions in English often involve hidden relationships that are rather complex and difficult for untrained readers to determine or recognize. Thus, they simply scan over them, assuming that they have grasped their content because all the individual words seem to be familiar. But if questioned or tested on what the material explicitly means, they would either fail or have great difficulty in explaining correctly what they read. Therefore, it is up to the author as they write (or translate) into translational English to be aware of any potential problem points. Then, by employing grammatical transformations, one would try to eliminate them where the content is not explicit enough to prevent ambiguity.

4.2 Clauses and sentences

To this point, I have dealt mainly with syntactic difficulties encountered on the individual word or phrase level. I now wish to expand my treatment of this subject to include several common features of grammar or syntax that have a special bearing on entire clauses and sentences. Again, the underlying principle to be followed when writing or reconstructing sentences is to organize the structure to have the *most explicit* and *clearest possible* semantic relationships between the various constituent elements. This is necessary, in the first place, because the average person for whom we are writing lacks reading experience and

facility in English, and secondly, they usually have limited knowledge of the subject matter.

To begin with, one must make the clauses *shorter* and *less structurally embedded* to improve readability. The reason for this is that an inexperienced reader can decipher a set of content units *packaged*, so to speak, into two clauses more easily than they can the identical set packaged into a single clause. What, then, can be done to improve a text's relative clarity? I offer five suggestions below.

4.2.1 Transform nominalizations

One of the most effective ways to shorten clauses, as has already been emphasized, is to transform *event nouns* (e.g., redemption, remission, payment, judgment, termination, forgiveness) into verbs. This automatically increases the number of verbs in the passage. Since the verb usually requires a subject, this process in turn increases the number of personal words (pronouns and names) within the clause. However, the verb form of a word tends to be shorter and more commonly used than its nominalized form.

4.2.2 Use active verbs

The use of active verbs instead of semantically complex nouns also leads to *simpler* clauses, but *more* of them. This can result in a greater number of shorter sentences, although it frequently leads to more clauses per sentence, but simpler ones. For example, the sentence, "In the event of his coming, our suffering will be ended" consists of only one clause. However, when it is transformed to "When Christ comes again, we shall not suffer anymore," there are two clauses, but the entire sentence is less complicated. In most cases, the net result of this process is a composition that is somewhat longer than the alternative, even though the individual clauses are shorter.

This means that *less* information is *packaged* into each clause on average. Consequently, it tends to be *more* accessible to the inexperienced reader, or someone who is unfamiliar with the theological or biblical content of the message.

4.2.3 Avoid front-heaviness

One must endeavor to avoid what is termed front-heaviness when writing. A front-heavy construction is a sentence composed of several dependent clauses or long nominal phrases that occur first. Thus, the *initial* part of such a sentence is often noticeably *longer* than its second part. The reason for the difficulty in comprehension is that such a construction requires a greater memory span. In other words, the reader is expected to retain the first part of such a complex sentence in their memory until they read the second part and discover the semantic relationship between the two. The process of interpretation generally requires less effort and is more likely to be successful if the first part is the shorter one. For example, "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Rom 2:7 NIV) could be transformed into, God will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good, seeking the glory, honor, and eternal life that he offers.

4.2.4 Avoid embedding multiple clauses

On a related note, it is important to avoid embedding *multiple* clauses within the sentence and so reduce structural complexity. Although subordinate clauses can and should be used to distinguish important semantic relationships, it is generally best not to have more than two of them in each sentence. Furthermore, it is not necessary to give preference to independent clauses linked together in coordinate relationships, rather than subordinate ones, for this may *hide* significant semantic connections.

But when a subordinate clause precedes an independent clause, the former must not be too long. It should also contain a conjunction (predictor) that explicitly indicates that a main clause is to follow and clearly marks the meaningful connection between clauses. (E.g., All people are sinners, and God provided a Savior > Since[13] all people are sinners, God provided a Savior.)

4.2.5 Use punctuation with care

Do not use capitalization, spelling, or punctuation as a crutch to try and clear up otherwise ambiguous or misleading writing. Avoid using the semicolon, which usually makes sentences too long to conceptually process or articulate with a natural intonation. Thus, your intended meaning should be clearly and correctly understood as the words are being spoken or read aloud to the people, which is the best way to test the intelligibility of a written text. As mentioned, before publication, always test your written materials, even such details as your punctuation, by reading the text aloud to yourself—or better, to a member of the receptor community.

5. Application of the Principles

To further evaluate and practice some of the issues discussed in this article,[14] critically examine the sample theological text by Nehls (2022) below. It exemplifies the type of publication that might be considered nowadays for translation into another language. I have italicized a selection of potential

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13 *Since* provides the reason which leads to a result.
14 Another helpful exercise would be for readers to add to the various illustrative English examples and potential problem points that have been identified in this article.

problem points specifically from the perspective of South-Central Africa and the Bantu languages. How would you simplify, modify, or re-express these examples in a non-Western language and cultural setting that you are familiar with? Make a descriptive listing of the main difficulties that you encounter along with some of the main translational English strategies that you would apply to deal with them in a contextually sensitive and meaning-oriented manner.

5.1 A basic Bible introduction:[15]

The Bible contains the *self-revelation of God*, or *simply put*, God wants to tell us who He is, and what He wants us to know *and be*. But there is a problem. Just try to *explain to a grasshopper* that you, a human, have cultivated a garden, and wish that it should not feed on, and *consequently strip a particular plant in it*.

Sadly, a grasshopper does not understand English, Chinese, or any other human language. Neither do *we* understand the *'heavenly'* language. So, when God attempts to communicate to us who He is, and what He wants us to know *about Him, ourselves, our enemy*, and the world in which we live, He uses *our* words, *our* thoughts, and *our* capacity to comprehend, to be understood by us. *That became our Bible*.

While we do understand the words, and perhaps also many concepts in the Bible, we understand only those that *relate to our 'earthly' context*, simply because those that are *'heavenly'*, are incomprehensible and inaccessible for us. Just try to comprehend *who God is*, and what Heaven, or *eternity*, or hell are. Perhaps we even fail to understand what *'agape'*, *God's divine love*, really *and fully* is, *simply* because we will always apply the meaning of that word *in the way we experience it, perhaps like 'I love ice-cream'*.

We live in *the era of airplanes, television, and ice-cream*. Yet the Word of God needs to address, or convey, the *self-same* message equally to the nomadic shepherds and peasants wherever and whenever, as to *our high-tech world. Can we see the problem?* God *solved it in His own way*. First, He spoke to us through His earthly servants, the prophets, using prophecies, historic events and manifold parables, *metaphors, analogies, allegories*, and *just plain stories. But then happened the phenomenal…, but first things first*.

6. Conclusion

To be sure, it takes considerable practice to make the more familiar, commonly used words and structures of English say what you want to convey. But audience-focused, cross-cultural writers (translators) must learn to express their ideas and to attract attention and interest with their published resources if they truly intend to increase the intelligibility and impact of their message. As Joyce Chaplin (1966, 4) notes:

> Learn to use little words in a big way.
> It is hard to do, but they say what you mean.
> When you don't know what you mean, use big words;
> That often fools little people.

It is not easy to write in simplified and contextualized translational English, especially for those who have been involved for many years in communicating the Gospel message in a Western setting, or who have been

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15 This sample text comes from a publication that is meant to be "an informative course on the Bible and its teaching prepared by Christians for Muslims who are eager to explore the Biblical faith" (Nehls 2022, 5).

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depending primarily on standard published (sometimes very popular) theological resources. For simplicity's sake authors will oftentimes have to give up some of the favorite aspects of their normal manner of writing, like the stylistic and rhetorical features that they have grown used to over the years that seem most natural and quite effective to them. In the beginning, they may be forced to write all their materials twice or more. They may first write as they would have done for a Western audience and then rewrite it to adapt the form of their message for use in another world region.

Indeed, a great deal of time and effort is often required to communicate *with* people rather than at them. Is it worth it? Only significant audience/reader research and testing will tell. But faces that light up with understanding as people read the Good News of Salvation and related biblical topics in language that they can readily understand will convince us that going the extra mile in our message composition and text production pays off. That is true whether we are talking about English or any other language that we use as a tool to communicate the truths of sacred Scripture.

The need for proclaiming the saving truths of Scripture in a clear and meaningful manner, whether this be in speech or writing, is just as great and urgent today as it was in the days of the apostles. The reply of the Ethiopian eunuch to Philip's question, "Do you really understand what you're reading?" highlights the problem for millions in the world today: "Why, how can I without somebody to guide me?" (Acts 8:30, 31 Beck's American Translation). As one prepares (writes or translates) Christian literature to fulfill this vital calling here in Africa and elsewhere, it would also be good to keep in mind what the Apostle Paul has to say on the subject of instructing and encouraging others in the teachings of God's Word. In 1 Corinthians 14: 19 (Beck's American Translation) he says, "In the church I would rather say five words that can be understood, in order to teach others, than ten thousand words in a language [or style of writing] that nobody understands."

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