

## PROBLEMS IN THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE FUNCTIONAL- EQUIVALENT APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

The functional-equivalent approach to Bible translation is based on a specific view of communication, viz. that it is a process which takes place within a closed cultural circle. This view of communication results in a view of the Bible as a time-bound (and not a time-directed) document which can communicate only in the closed circle of sender-message-first readers within their own socio-historical environment. Consequently it is seen as the task of the translator to make the Bible communicate to modern man *via* a process of transformation of the Biblical message. This transformation is conducted in a manner which corresponds with the idea that textual form and message can be separated. For Christians who view the Bible as God's Word which is time-directed but not time-bound, and at the same time God's Word which communicates with believers of all time, these theoretical viewpoints of the functional-equivalent approach are problematic.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As Eugene Nida (1964:159-160) shows, there are basically two approaches to translation: the formal-equivalent approach and the dynamic-equivalent approach (see also Van den Brink 1994:113). The dynamic-equivalent approach was later adapted and renamed the "functional-equivalent" approach. From the mid-eighties, the major approach to Bible translation has been functional equivalence, as opposed to formal correspondence. Strictly speaking, however, formal correspondence and functional equivalence should not be taken as two totally separate methodologies. Rather, they represent two approaches which can be seen as the extreme poles of translation theory (Nida 1964:160). Precisely because these are two approaches, there is no watertight division between them. Every translation of the Bible contains both formal-correspondent elements as well as functional-equivalent elements to a greater or lesser degree. Nevertheless these two approaches represent the two extreme poles within translation science (Sterk 1994:131; Wendland 1996:126).

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As a result of their methodological orientation, formal-equivalent translators are often accused of reproducing the form of the original text rather than its meaning. This type of accusation, however, rests on a caricature, as Martin (1997:8) shows, since formal correspondence, even in its early applications, seeks as far as possible to convey not only the structural information of the message, but also its general meaning (Sterk 1994:132).

Likewise functional-equivalent translators are often unjustly accused of being less interested in the source text and mainly interested in its readability in the receptor language. However, although functional-equivalent translation seeks to cast the message in good contemporary language usage, it does not negate the text and its structural qualities but strives towards producing a text which is of equal value to the source text (Van Bruggen 1975:54). The transition from dynamic equivalence to functional equivalence especially represents a greater effort by translators to do more justice to formal and structural aspects of the text (De Blois & Mewe, this volume).

Van den Brink (1994:113) reckons that almost all modern translations of the Bible try to maintain a middle position between the two extreme translation approaches, while one leans more towards formal correspondence and another towards a more functional-equivalent approach. Martin (1997:9) shows however that such a description of the translation situation is an oversimplification. Since these two approaches concern not only the practical process of translation but also, and especially, involve two sets of theoretical approaches, there is actually no gray area between them. In fact, both formal correspondence and functional equivalence concern a particular theoretical bias. Although in practice every translation contains elements of both approaches, every translator has a specific position regarding his theoretical foundation (Martin 1997:9-10).

I find Martin's description of the situation to be an oversimplification itself, because it seems to describe the translation situation too much in a black-white framework. A translation which for example is done within the framework of the formal-correspondence approach must of necessity translate some places with functional equivalence in the interests of clarity. This however does not mean that the translator has thereby departed from the theoretical starting points of the functional-correspondence approach. Conversely, when a functional-equivalent translation at times shows formal correspondence with the source language, it is no indication that it supports the theoretical starting points of formal correspondence (cf. Sterk 1994:131).

From this it appears that the theoretical starting points of each of these approaches cannot be ignored. As a matter of fact, in the evaluation of any

translation the theoretical starting points of the translator(s) are of cardinal importance. In this presentation the focus is on the theoretical foundation of the functional-equivalent method of translation. As the important issue is the usefulness of this approach specifically for Bible translation, attention will also be given to the theological-philosophical foundation of the functional-equivalent approach.

In my opinion Van Bruggen (1975:55) maintains correctly that the functional-equivalent approach has to do not only with language, but also with a particular understanding of the nature of communication and a particular understanding of the nature of the Bible. There is also a growing awareness among scholars that the functional-equivalent approach does not sufficiently appreciate the unity between form and meaning. This defect can also be related to the theoretical starting points of functional equivalence.

## 2. TRANSLATION AS COMMUNICATION

### 2.1 Description

One of the basic starting points of the functional-equivalent approach is that the Bible writers wrote in order to communicate so as to be understood (Nida & Taber 1982:7). With this starting point the functional-equivalent approach does not differ from the formal-correspondence approach, as any suggestion that the formal-correspondence approach may imply that the Bible writers were communicating so as not to be understood, would result in a caricature.

The critical question is however how each of the two approaches defines communication. Nida (1972:309-316) indicates that communication was previously seen as an event on the level of the passing of information, while the new changed understanding upon which the functional-equivalent approach rests, is that communication is a process which takes place within a total cultural setting (compare Van Bruggen 1975:56; Stine 1995:142). The message recorded in the Bible is linked to the cultural situation of the writer and the readers of that time. Therefore it was a message which communicated to the readers of the time, but, because it does not correspond to the cultural situation of the present-day readers, it also cannot communicate with present-day readers. Therefore a functional-equivalent translation wants to distinguish between the socio-historical orientation of the Bible writers/readers and the socio-historical orientation of the modern readers in order to communicate the message effectively to the modern readers (see also Wendland 1996:127).

This shift in communication theory can be seen in connection with the paradigm shifts which have taken place in Biblical hermeneutics. Lategan's (1984:3) description of the hermeneutic interest which shifted during the 19th and 20th centuries from *sender* to *message* to *receptor*, is valid also in the field of translation science. Within functional-equivalent translation theory, however, the *sender-message-receptor* model gets a unique emphasis which means that communication can take place only within the circle of *sender-message-receptor* and — most importantly — that this circle is a *closed* circle of own time and own culture (Nida 1960:36, 40; compare Van Bruggen 1975:57).

The communication events of the message to the first receptors were therefore caught up within the circle of the socio-historical situation of that time. Were the translator therefore merely to reproduce the message in a modern language without taking the socio-historical situation (of both the original readers and the contemporary readers) into account, it would lead to a communicationless reproduction of the message. So as to allow the message to communicate to the contemporary receptor, it must be taken over by the translator to the (closed) circle of the contemporary reader's own socio-historical situation. If not, the translation does not lead to true communication (compare Van Bruggen 1975:57). Accordingly functional-equivalent translators, with a view to the effective communication of the Bible in the language of the receptor cultures have, unfortunately, turned many modern editions into totally Western texts that fit into contemporary contexts far too snugly (compare Joubert, this volume).

## 2.2 Evaluation

### 2.2.1 The Bible seen as a time-bound book

The idea that the communication-events of the message of Scripture are locked up within the circle of the first writer and readers' time and circumstances and are restricted to them, coincides closely with the notion that the Bible contains a time-bound message (compare Vorster 1977:1-4). According to this view the Bible books are so caught up in the old world of their authorship that it becomes a real question whether they can indeed communicate in the modern world of today.

The view of the Bible as a time-bound book came strongly to the fore in the Historical Criticism of the 19th century. It was taken further during the 20th century by the socio-scientific approach (and to a lesser degree by

the socio-historical approach) with the idea that the Bible was merely the product of the society of that time (compare Lategan 1984:8).

It indeed seems to be a valid comment when someone says that the Bible was really written for readers of two or three thousand years ago and that the receptors of the Bible in the twentieth century are totally different and experience completely different circumstances from the people of that time. But if the Bible is handled as a time-bound message, it carries with it a particular value judgement about the Bible which does not coincide with what the Bible itself says. The Lord repeatedly makes it clear in the Bible that He is directing what He has to say not only to listeners of the first century and earlier, but to a much wider circle of listeners from many centuries thereafter. Van Bruggen (1975:68) has the lovely comparison: "Het zou dwaas zijn om aan te nemen dat een troonrede alleen bedoeld is voor de mensen die in de Ridderzaal aanwezig zijn."<sup>2</sup> Just as unthinkable as that a regal message and decree are meant to communicate only to the first audience, is that God's written revelation was meant only for the first readers. Therefore the Bible, although it was directed towards the time and circumstances of the first addressees, was not meant to communicate merely within the restricted horizon of their time and circumstances, but within the framework of God's unlimited purpose for the addressees of all times. In this connection Paul the apostle writes about the Old Testament Scriptures in Romans 15:4:

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (NIV).

In addition, the Scripture itself testifies that it is not just the product of the society of that time and their socio-historical circumstances, seeing that it communicates a wisdom which is

not of this age or of the rulers of this age ... but a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began (1 Cor. 2:6,7).

The Bible is indeed directed towards the concrete human circumstances of the ancient time; nevertheless it is not the product of, nor caught up within the closed circle of the socio-historical situation of the time. For everyone who views the Bible as time-directed but not time-bound, the view of the Bible upon which the functional-equivalent approach rests, is problematic.

2 It would be foolish to assume that the message from the throne is meant only for those present in the royal hall.

### 2.2.2 Communication of the Bible

Linked with the view of a time-bound Bible to which the functional-equivalent approach seems to subscribe, is the view that the Bible can be communicated. Caught up within the closed circle of the socio-historical situation of the time, the Bible in its original form could communicate only to the first readers. The Bible cannot communicate to the contemporary reader, unless the translator enables it to communicate.

In this respect the functional-equivalent approach seems to agree with Vorster's (1977:18) contention that it is the task of the exegete "om die Bybel te interpreteer en dit verstaanbaar te maak sodat dit uiteindelik kan kommunikeer".<sup>3</sup> This contention can be taken back even further to the theology of Rudolph Bultmann who with his form criticism wanted to take the Bible out of the historical and mythological setting with the aim of making it understandable to the contemporary reader (compare Van Iersel 1982:114-115). The functional-equivalent approach therefore opposes the Barthian view that the Word makes itself understandable to the hearer and links itself to the Bultmannian idea that the Bible becomes understandable only provided that it addresses the questions of the modern person in his existential existence (compare Van Iersel 1982:113).

With this point of departure the unique nature of the Bible as the revelation-word of God and the unbreakable unity of Word and Spirit is forced into the background. A mere *sender-message-receptor*-schema can easily lead to the Holy Spirit as the actual (and always present) Sender being lost sight of and only the human writers being seen. To enable the Bible to communicate then becomes a mere human activity which leaves no room for the Holy Spirit who by His compelling activity reveals the Scripture message even to little children while it remains hidden to the learned (Mt. 11:25).

## 3. TRANSFORMATION OF THE BIBLE MESSAGE

### 3.1 Description

One's view of communication of the Bible also influences one's view on the task of the church in respect of the Bible message (Van Bruggen 1975:58). This seems also to be the case with the functional-equivalent approach to Bible translation. Nida & Taber (1982:5, 8) state clearly that the functional-equivalent translator must set himself the goal to reproduce the meaning of

<sup>3</sup> Translated: "to interpret the Bible and make it understandable, so that it eventually can communicate."

the text by presenting it in another, new form which can communicate to the modern reader. This involves a reconstruction (or at least a transformation<sup>4</sup>) of the Bible message (Van Bruggen 1975:58).

By the transformation of the message the functional-equivalent approach does not, however, want to sever the connection with the text. It is also by no means an attempt at modernising the Bible. Cultural transformation is a bridging activity which Nida & Taber (1982:110-111) themselves agree, is the task of preachers and not the task of translators. Translators must also not trespass on the realm of preachers by wanting to make matters which are only implicit in the text, explicit in the translation (Nida & Taber 1982:111; see also Sterk 1994:137-138).

Nevertheless functional-equivalent translation is part of a transformation process. It takes the first step in the direction of transformation, e.g. by the recalculation of weights and measures and by redistribution of semantic components (e.g. "to put in the right relationship" as equivalent for "make righteous", compare Nida & Taber 1982:109). Later theorists, by applying the insights of "relevance theory", have phrased the purpose of translation as the provision of material to the hearer/reader so that "his attempt at interpretation will yield adequate contextual effects ... without requiring unnecessary processing effort" (Wendland 1996:127). The border between the realm of the translator and that of the preacher is hereby systematically blurred, which leads to the translator gaining an increasingly stronger role as Bible mediator (Van Bruggen 1975:59). This blurring of the boundaries is supported by the foundational idea of the functional-equivalent approach that communication is not the transfer of information but is a process which takes place (compare 2.1 above).

## 3.2 Evaluation

### 3.2.1 Transformation and communication

Transformation of the text, as it functions within the functional-equivalent approach, is aimed not only at making the Bible message understandable for the contemporary reader, but also and particularly at making it communicable. Transformation of the text then leads to adapting idiomatic expressions and figurative language which falls outside the realm of the experience and language usage of the contemporary reader, to a level upon which

<sup>4</sup> In opposition to a reconstruction or transformation of the text, Sterk (1994:131) suggests a "re-creation" of the text.

it communicates approximately the same message as the original (compare Nida & Taber 1982:105-111).

Although transformation for the sake of understandability is a real part of all translation, it nevertheless becomes something else when it is applied for the sake of communicability. Then it enters a realm, which differs little in principle from Bultmann's dehistoricising and demythologising of the text for the sake of better communication of the *kerugma*. Of course the functional-equivalent approach does not want to resort to a Bultmannian dehistoricising and demythologising as such, but it in fact rests basically on the same theoretical grounds. That this is indeed so, is obvious from Nida's (1960:41) comment that certain parts of the Bible, e.g. "the wrestling with an angel", should be interpreted mythologically.

The tendency to "dehistoricise" the text in the process of translation, has become one of the major points of critique against the functional-equivalent approach during the nineties (see De Blois & Mewe 2002). Dehistoricised Bible translations do not meet the modern-day requirements of Bible readers, since the inherent strangeness of the Biblical text, which originated in a cultural world which was totally different from ours, is not accounted for sufficiently (Joubert, this volume).

### 3.2.2 Translator and preacher

Once again the transformation-approach opens the door wide for the translator to take an even more important place between the Bible message and the contemporary reader. The reader becomes dependent upon the translator not only for understanding but also for the interpretation of the Bible message. Transformation which is imported no longer only for the understanding but also for the communicability of the message, already stands on the level of interpretation, which belongs to the realm of the preacher. Strictly speaking, it is not even the preacher's task to make the Bible message communicable, but only to indicate its relevance within the present-day situation of the contemporary hearers.

## 4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FORM AND MEANING

The emphasis which the functional-equivalent approach puts on the message which has to be communicated, has resulted in the form of the source text being forced to the background. The form of the source text is resolutely abandoned in favour of the clear rendering in the natural idiom of the receptor language, of that which is seen as the message or meaning of the

source (Sterk 1994:130). The theoretical basis of this way of reasoning seems to be a separation between the form and content of a text, a way of reasoning which goes back to the structuralism of the sixties and seventies. The result was that in functional-equivalent translations all texts — independent of genre and style and other matters pertaining to form — tended to be “channeled through the common language filter” (De Blois & Mewe, this volume).

In the meantime linguistics and translation science have come to realise that form and content cannot be separated. The various forms of the source language are not only helpful, but are also highly relevant and meaningful. As a matter of fact, form and content should be regarded as the “complete meaning package expressed in and through the source language” (Wendland 1996:126). Appreciation for the strong link between form and message should not be misconstrued as a desire to return to formal correspondence. It does, however, contribute to the growing uneasiness about some of the practices of the functional equivalent approach (Sterk 1994:130).

## 5. SUMMARY

The purpose of this article is not to present a complete evaluation or description of the functional-equivalent approach to Bible translation. It merely aims to indicate a few problematic concerns touching upon the theoretical foundation of the approach. The problems regarding the theoretical foundations of the functional-equivalent approach indicated above, include

- the view of the Bible as a time-bound book;
- the view that the Bible is not able to communicate in the world of today and that it requires the translator to enable it to communicate;
- the view that the text can be dehistoricised without loss of meaning;
- the view that meaning can be separated from form without loss of understanding.

In each case the unique nature of the Bible and the unique nature of the actual Bible author is not sufficiently taken into account.

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