

## FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE AND THE NEW DUTCH TRANSLATION PROJECT

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### ABSTRACT

In this article De Blois and Mewe demonstrate how functional-equivalent principles had been originally defined with regard to the Netherlands Bible Society's *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (New Bible Translation) and had to be redefined in light of the need for a better theoretical model. The model, outlined in the article, also served as a handle to avoid ambiguity and inconsistency in the way principles were interpreted and/or implemented, and created a framework for responding to needs expressed by the target audience.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Dynamic and functional equivalence

De Blois (1997; see also De Blois 1998) argued that Nida and Taber's theoretical model known as "dynamic equivalence" had certain deficiencies, which needed to be dealt with. Form and meaning issues, in particular, had been treated in an over-simplistic way. As Smalley (1991) rightly pointed out, translators of the early generation of dynamic-equivalent translations at times failed to transfer elements of meaning that were part of the form and structure of the text itself. This undoubtedly resulted in translation losses, which critics of the approach were always eager to point out. In the mid-eighties the term "functional equivalence" came into being. This conceptual adjustment in terminology reflected more realism, since translators in their effort to transfer a text from one language to another attempt to do so in functional-equivalent sets of forms, which — in so far as possible- — match the meaning of the original.

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## 1.2 New trends in the application of functional-equivalent principles

De Blois further argued that the second-generation functional-equivalent translations made successful efforts to do more justice to formal and structural aspects of the text. Despite that trend, it has become obvious — certainly in the Western world — that for church use (liturgy, Bible study, etc.) functional-equivalence translations do not meet all the needs. It is not just the message that needs to be communicated. There is a growing interest among Christians all over the world in the ways the Biblical texts are structured, the beauty and impact of poetical language, the rhetorical features of texts, etc. Consequently, the market has grown for translations that take a middle-of-the-road position between formal and functional equivalence or perhaps — as we will argue in the case of the new Dutch translation — are based on a different concept of dynamic and functional-equivalent translation. Functional equivalence in the past thirty years was often practised at the common language level. All texts — independent of genre and style of the original — tended to be channelled through the common language filter. This was perhaps acceptable in situations with a great emphasis on missionary outreach and evangelism. However, in a context where people are eager to obtain a deeper understanding of the background of the Biblical text a more sophisticated approach to translation is highly desirable.

This should not be misconstrued necessarily as a desire to go back to formal equivalence. We have to distinguish here between linguistic and textual features of the source language material. Copying linguistic forms of the original texts in a literal manner leads to unnatural forms of language that do not take the receptor language seriously, or archaic forms of translationese some people know from older translations.

The new approach recognises that there is great diversity within the Scriptures in style and genre with its characteristic forms, structures, themes, etc., all of which have to be reflected somehow in the translated text, taking full advantage of the contemporary linguistic and literary resources of both the source and the receptor languages.

## 1.3 New Dutch Translation (NBV)<sup>3</sup>

In Section 5 of De Blois' 1997 article, he concluded on the basis of his analysis of the documents on translation principles and rules, that the approach followed by the NBV represented a middle-of-the-road position in between

3 Dutch abbreviation of "Nieuwe Bijbel Vertaling" (New Bible Translation).

formal and functional equivalence, or perhaps more functional but at a higher, more formal level of language. It has become evident that this conclusion needs updating! The situation is a lot more complex.

Tamara Mewe (2000) wrote a Master's thesis on the theoretical basis of the NBV-project. She found out among other things that in the description of the translation methodology some of the generic principles underlying the project are not broken down in a set of specific translation rules, whereas certain other rules do not clearly reflect a governing principle!

Mewe's research project exposed a number of theoretical inconsistencies underlying the NBV-approach. At the level of translation practice one might conclude that the results of the first efforts turned out to be rather diverse and in some ways a little unbalanced. This can be attributed to the fact that the translation team is composed of several mini-teams (each made up of a Biblical scholar and a Dutch language and/or translation expert) and a staff team, all people with different (church) backgrounds, who interpret and/or implement the principles in quite diverse ways, and have different expectations of what the new translation should look like. The issues that caused some friction and controversy can be summarised as follows:

- The relationship between the macro- and microstructure of the source text and how this affects various translation decisions.
- The fuzzy distinction between text features (with signal function to be conveyed in translation) and language features (language-specific and non-transferable).
- The controversy with regard to the translation of "motiv"-words in rhetorical texts. Should they be translated concordantly or with contextual variation in accordance with Dutch language conventions?
- The different opinions on what is good, natural Dutch.
- The tendency among some translators to go beyond the textual/linguistic meaning of the text, which results at times in translations that are more interpretative than the source texts. At times it even beats the existing Common Language Translation (CLT) in this respect.
- The reluctance of some key people in the project to accept other helps as an intrinsic part of the translation, as a result of which more explanation ended up in the text itself than would have been the case otherwise.

It became evident, because of the diverse, often inconsistent implementation of principles and rules in the draft translations produced by the mini-teams, that we had to come to a clearer understanding of the goals of the

project and a less ambiguous description of its translation principles and guidelines. Given the fact that the project was about halfway towards completion, the sooner this could be done, the better.

In 2000, De Blois, as chairman of the staff team responsible for quality control, instituted a translation policy committee with the task of reviewing the existing policy documents, highlighting inconsistencies, contradictions and gaps in the guidelines, and making an effort — by means of a new document — to

- clarify the theoretical basis for the project;
- position this translation in relation to two other modern Dutch translations: the CLT<sup>4</sup> and the (Roman Catholic) Willibrord<sup>5</sup> translation;
- deal with inconsistencies in the implementation of the principles by establishing a hierarchy of translation principles and rules, wherever necessary and feasible.

Researcher Mewe was employed to participate in the tasks of the policy committee with a view to carrying out more research and drafting the new document with full support from the committee members.

One of the weaknesses the project suffered from was that it lacked a clear focus with regard to target audience. At the beginning of the undertaking there was an understanding that this translation was to be primarily the church Bible for the new century. This more restricted view was abandoned in the course of time. Given the growing interest in the Bible as an ancient literary and inspirational document, the view developed that this one translation would be able to meet the needs of church and society at large. This broad approach to the issue of target audience in translation constituted another factor that contributed to the diversity in style, language level and extent of restructuring of the translated text.

In the next sections of this article we will highlight some of the issues that have been addressed in the final document of the policy committee. This document was presented and discussed during a joint meeting of the project board and the translation team in the summer of 2000.

4 *Groot Nieuws Bijbel* (revised in 1996), Netherlands Bible Society and Catholic Bible Foundation.

5 *De Bijbel* (Willibrord-vertaling), revised in 1995, Catholic Bible Foundation.

## 2. FORMAL AND FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE — WHERE DOES THE NBV STAND?

### 2.1 Undeniably functional equivalence

There is no question that the NBV will be a worthy representative of the functional-equivalent tradition. The translation will not just copy source language forms and structures, because the translation aims at contemporary, natural Dutch. Both the source and receptor languages are taken seriously in the translation process. That is why from the outset the translation team at all levels in the decision process has been made up of Biblical scholars and Dutch language experts. The pragmatics of the receptor language take priority in the translation.

### 2.2 *Skopos*<sup>6</sup> of the project

Obviously, the translation project is not carried out in isolation. The review process has both an internal and external component. About 60 external reviewers representing the diversity of church denominations, including the Jewish religious community, receive drafts reviewed and checked for consistency by the “book team” — consisting of the two translators, two reviewers and a Biblical scholar and language expert from the co-ordinating staff group — and submit their comments and criticism. At least two writers and/or literary critics are hired to review each Bible book from a literary perspective. The co-ordinating staff group reviews the input from all these external reviewers in accordance with the project principles and proposes changes in the translated text for ratification by the project board.

One of the statements in the new policy document has attempted to clarify the issue of how the publishing Bible agencies envision the translation to be used, and for what functions. The primary focus of the project has become the anticipated use of the translation in church liturgy. If the NBV-translation is to replace the standard formal-equivalent NBG’51 translation (Protestant) and the well-known more contemporary Willibrord-translation (Catholic), it should gain broad acceptance, because of its quality and conse-

6 A term developed by K. Reiss and H. J. Vermeer in the late 1970s.

The skopos theory stresses the interactional, pragmatic aspects of translation, arguing that the shape of the translated text should above all be determined by the function or “skopos” that it is intended to fulfill in the target context (Shuttleworth & Cowie 1997).

quently, its suitability for use in liturgy, Bible exposition and Bible study. It should be a translation that can be read aloud in church (recitable) and be adaptable for chanting purposes.<sup>7</sup> It should have helpful notes and other helps for the reader. It should reflect the literary forms and structures of the source texts, retain as much as possible Biblical imagery and metaphor, if functional in contemporary Dutch and expressing the correct intended meaning. The intended liturgical use of the translation implies that marked style in the source text at the rhetorical, syntactic and lexical level is reflected somehow in the translation. Functional repetition of Biblical “motiv”-words in rhetorical texts should therefore be recognisable in translation with as little variation as possible. The translation should refrain from spelling out contextual implicatures and focus more on expressing the explicatures of the Biblical text (terminology used by project board member Lourens de Vries,<sup>8</sup> following Gutt 1991), because many people are familiar with the Biblical text and its background and do not expect a high level of implicit information made explicit. Moreover, it is typical of language to leave some information implicit, because what is intended to be communicated can be derived to a large extent from the textual context. With regard to the Pauline epistles, we received an appeal from some on the project board to do more justice to Paul’s condensed style and leave implicit information in certain Greek genitive constructions more “open” than is usually done in more meaning-based approaches.

If the primary focus of the NBV-translation is to meet the needs of the church community, in accordance with what was expressed by representatives of churches at the time the project was conceived, the secondary focus has to be on prospective literary users of the translation. The input received from literary critics and writers indicates that to a large extent their interest and expectations overlap with those of the primary target group. The only difference, perhaps, is that the NBV may presuppose a somewhat broader spectrum of background knowledge of the Bible and the Biblical world. Addressing this need in the translated text and reader’s helps would, of course, in the end also benefit the church user.

7 A few Psalms and sections of Qohelet have already been set to music. A small volume of Psalms set to music will be published in late 2002.

8 Unpublished paper, presented to a NBV-seminar. Cf. also De Vries (1999 & 2000).

### 3. POLICY ADJUSTMENTS

#### 3.1 The current description of translation method and policies

The policy committee decided to address the issue of the project's theoretical basis. The authors of the existing policy document<sup>9</sup> distinguish three basic approaches to translation:

- A. Source-Language-Oriented.
- B. Target-Culture-Oriented.
- C. Source-Text-Oriented *and* Target-Language-Oriented.

Method A is basically what we know as formal-equivalent translation. The translator transfers as far as possible the forms and structure of the source text, both at the macro- and micro-level.<sup>10</sup> (S)He hardly distinguishes between language and text features and tends to ignore the rules and norms of the target language. The pragmatic functions of the source text are not taken very seriously.

Method B comes close to the concept of functional-equivalent translation. What has priority is not the form of the source text, but the communication of the message. The supremacy of the communicative function of the text unavoidably results in loss of stylistic features of the source text in translation. Clarity of information is what counts. A B-translation is by definition more redundant and explicit.

Method C represents the basis for the NBV-approach. The translator commits himself to adapting the structure of the text to the linguistic conventions of the source language. (S)He makes his choices at the macro-level by mainly taking into account in the translation the functional features of the Biblical text. As (s)he allows the context and conventions of the target language to prevail, (s)he will sometimes be forced to translate similar source text elements in different ways. The translation will ideally be as understandable and as smooth or wooden as the original, but always using the full resources of the receptor language.

As was indicated in section 1.3, method C was interpreted and implemented by the translators in quite diverse ways, often resulting in rather

9 Doeltaalgericht en brontekstgetrouw: de vertaalmethode voor de NBV, NBV manual, section A5.

10 The macro-level includes the macro-syntax (discourse structure), narrative structure, style, context and intertextuality, whereas the micro-level is made up of micro-syntax, lexical features and phonetic features.

inconsistent draft translations. Undesired discrepancies in dealing with translation issues at the micro-level were often ascribed to peculiarities at the macro-level.

The policy committee decided that the methodical basis of the NBV was far from satisfactory. The description of method B was certainly not representative for the way functional-equivalent principles were implemented in the Dutch CLT. Furthermore, it became evident that the results of the application of method C by translators were not always very distinct from method B. On the contrary, at times it resulted in draft translations in which implicit information was spelled out much more frequently and key terms had been dealt with more inconsistently than was felt acceptable in the CLT.

### 3.2 The new policy document<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.2.1 Exoticising and naturalising

It was felt that a more fruitful way to distinguish the NBV-translation method from others was to make use of Holmes' (1998:45-52) framework of axes, particularly the one that represents a continuum between the poles of *exoticising* and *naturalising*. The axis can be used to mark or score on a scale of 1 to 5 to what extent elements of the source text are adapted — or not — to the prevailing norms and conventions of the target language and culture. If a translation feature scores 1, this indicates that it is rather exoticising in nature, if it is a 4 it is considered quite naturalising. However, it is essential that this scoring is done at different text levels. At the level of *language* — more particularly the lexicon, grammar and syntax — one notices shifts in the translated text that stem from differences between the source and the target language. At the level of *text types* one notices shifts that have something to do with the way text types are defined in the source and receptor cultures. The structure of e.g. literary texts may vary from culture to culture. At the *socio-cultural* level one can observe shifts in cultural elements reflecting certain distinctions between the two cultures. The translator needs to determine how familiar a cultural element is in the receptor culture.

11 This section contains translated material from this document, prepared by Mewe with input from project committee members. The committee benefited greatly from the theoretical insights of two of its members: Prof. Ton Naaijens and Prof. Lourens de Vries.

These three levels are not always easy to distinguish, but they better reflect the complexity of translation decisions. Since pragmatics and socio-cultural norms and values are part of the language, it is not always easy to make clear distinctions between the linguistic and socio-cultural levels.

The NBV-project is keen to express the “couleur locale” of the original texts, wherever possible. Although one of the aims of the project is to translate natural, contemporary Dutch, this does not mean that e.g. technical terms like “pretorium”, “centurio”, “legio” — military terms used by the author of Acts — have to be avoided. The same applies to terms like “profeet” (~“prophet”) and “evangelie” (~“gospel”). Use of these terms in the NBV shows that at the socio-cultural level this translation is more exoticising than naturalising. Transculturation is something to be avoided. Translation in an exoticising way is not always to be avoided, nor is a naturalising tendency by definition recommendable. It also depends what level we are talking about. At a literary (text type) level an NBV-text may score high in terms of exoticising, whereas this is not to be expected at the linguistic level.

This ties in with the issue of how the translation is intended and expected to be used. If one translates with the main focus on use in church, exoticising should not be much of a problem. In the same way an educated audience, not necessarily Christian, interested in literary masterpieces, likes to be inducted into the socio-cultural world in which the described events and teachings take place.

A comparative study undertaken by Mewe of small text units in well-translated sections of Mark 1 and 1 Corinthians 1, in which the NBV-translation is set off against two other contemporary translations — the Catholic Willibrord-translation and the CLT — shows that an overall score of certain text features on the axis of exoticising vs. naturalising points in the direction of the NBV taking a middle position in between the Willibrord- and the CLT-translations. The Willibrord-text tends to be more exoticising and the CLT more naturalising than the NBV, something which is to be both expected and targeted, in view of the primary audience’s needs and expectations.

### 3.2.2 Key word repetition and variation, concordance and consistence

One area of confusion and some controversy is that of word repetition and variation. The existing policy document allowed for “restricted concordance” in relation to repetition of one and the same (key) word, the same root, or even the same formula. This is of special importance in texts where

these elements have a particular rhetorical function. If that function can be identified, how will this phenomenon be expressed in the receptor language?

Suppose that repetition of a key word functions as a “motiv” in a text. Does that word have to be rendered in Dutch with the same word throughout? The problem may be that a given key word in the source text may cover a wider range of semantic components than its corresponding word in the receptor language. For example, the Greek word “pistis”, which is usually translated as “geloof” (~“faith”) also has an important component that is best expressed in Dutch as “vertrouwen” (~“trust”). In a rhetorical text like Galatians 2 the translators opted for variation between these Dutch terms (even within verse 16). They argued that it is important to convey to the recipients of the translation that the semantic domain of the source term is broader than its traditional equivalent in Dutch. Others argued, however, that in such cases the principle of variation is incompatible with that of restricted concordance. Even the translators of the CLT decided in favour of a single term in this case.

As we indicated in section 2.1, this translation follows many of the common functional-equivalent principles, including that of a contextual approach to meaning. The question is, whether within a semantic domain, there is need for variation, particularly when a term functions as a “motiv”-word. In order to point out a more specific direction, the policy committee has stated that in a case like this the principle of — restricted — concordance should prevail over highlighting all semantic components of a word.

### 3.2.3 Implicit information and focalisation

The translation policy allows for making information in the text more explicit, whenever elements of meaning that are implicitly present in the source text contribute to a better understanding of the text and result in more natural Dutch. The focus here is on textual and cultural features, rather than linguistic ones. Certain verbs in the original may require an object in the receptor language for linguistic reasons. Adding an object may therefore be a necessity.

The big question is: if we go beyond cases where information is added for linguistic reasons, how far can we go and where do we draw a borderline? In what cases do we need to apply this principle? This also ties in with the question of the *skopos* of the translation. How do we expect the translation to be used? In 1 Corinthians 6:12-13 the clause “all things are lawful to me” is generally interpreted as a statement from the mouth of those Paul is addressing. Many translations therefore put it in quotation marks. The

NBV, unlike the CLT, makes this interpretation quite unambiguous by translating: You say: “All things are lawful to me.” The argument is that this translation is to play an important part in church liturgy: these texts will be read aloud, and quotation marks cannot be heard! The *skopos* determines if and how much certain information is to be made explicit.

A related problem however is that the addition of implicit information may cause a shift of focalisation in the text. We may also communicate more than the author intended to say! Last but not least, spelling out implicit information undoubtedly has a negative effect on style. If compactness is a feature of Paul’s rhetorical style, one has to be cautious and not restructure too radically.

The policy committee’s proposed to apply this — legitimate — principle sparingly, particularly when it concerns socio-cultural information that was understood in the original communication settings. This translation is meant primarily for those who are already familiar with the Biblical background to some extent.

This issue will continue to give rise to more discussion in our team, since restraint in this respect at times conflicts with the principle of naturalness.

### 3.2.4 Naturalness

Naturalness of language can only be defined in the context of the question what kind of translation one is doing and how it is envisioned to be used. In a liturgical context a level of language can be used that is quite distinct from common language. Repetition of words and phrases may function differently in the context of church liturgy and may be considered more acceptable than in other contexts. It was argued by a prominent member of the project board that the level and tone of the language used in the NBV-translation, which is envisioned to become the standard translation for the churches, should be recognisable and appealing to the extent that people from various confessions and church traditions will be prepared to accept this translation as their new Holy Scripture.

Apart from the intended *skopos* of the translation, there are textual considerations to be considered. The genre of the source text also evokes certain expectations of the language level to be used. The question of naturalness is considered differently when the translated text is clearly poetic. Poetic texts can be less redundant than prose. But also in rhetorical prose texts a higher level of compactness of text can be quite acceptable.

In Psalm 114:3 the NBV translates: “the sea saw and fled”. Grammatically, this is not a correct Dutch sentence, because the verb “see” requires

an object. In narrative texts translators would either supply an object or use a different verb. In poetry, however, such an incomplete sentence is possible and acceptable. Apart from the issue of genre, the NBV seeks to do justice in translation to the style(s) of the source text. Natural Dutch allows for different levels of style or register, depending on what the source text offers. That is why one finds both formal expressions and what can be considered common language in this translation.

This does not mean that the style and form of the source text are always retained in translation. First of all, the function of that particular style or form needs to be determined. If copying the form or style results in a shift of function from the perspective of the recipient, it would be preferable to choose a form that would be more in line with the pragmatic function of the text for the intended audience. That is why in 1 Corinthians quotations from the OT are not always displayed in poetic form, even though the quoted verses in the OT itself were considered poetry. The translators argued that when Paul quotes an OT poetic text primarily because of its content, the quote should be rendered in prose form.

Natural Dutch should not be fully equated with contemporary Dutch. The NBV-project, of course, aims at a translation in contemporary Dutch, but this also varies with context and genre. Certain genres allow for language of a more formal level than others and given the expectation that this translation will be used in liturgical settings, a certain amount of traditional language may be considered natural, understandable and even appropriate. Furthermore, one could argue that contemporary language is not by definition considered appropriate and acceptable in certain liturgical settings.

The chairman of the project argued in one of his public statements that we should resist the temptation of wishing to clarify even what in the source text itself may be somewhat impenetrable and hard to fully comprehend. Attempting to understand a quality text may require special effort on the part of the reader.

### 3.2.5 Notes and helps

Recently, the project board created room for more notes and reader's helps than was originally felt desirable. Even though the original documents made mention of the need for such tools for obvious reasons, the long-standing Bible reading tradition in the protestant world caused some reluctance in the minds of board members to giving in to what many consider the needs of the modern Bible user. For a number of years translators were expected to provide notes only in situations where their translated text

deviated from the BHS Masoretic text or the Nestle/Aland Greek NT, in other words, text-critical notes only.

Given the nature and *skopos* of the NBV-project and the expectations of some users groups, the project policy with regard to notes and other helps had to be broadened. After all, we do not wish to make too much implicit information explicit in translation! After a long discussion, the project board decided to accept notes in the case of:

- Alternative translations of the source text, if linguistically and exegetically sound.
- Translations of names understood or alluded to in the text, which would be disturbing if incorporated in the text itself; play on words and other text features that have an important function, but cannot be meaningfully and naturally expressed in translation.

These notes, as well as the text-critical ones, will be considered an intrinsic part of the translation and will appear in any future edition of the NBV-Bible, whether they be Netherlands Bible Society/Catholic Bible Society or licensed editions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Now that the — sometimes heated — discussions on the committee's proposed policy adjustments have come to an end, it seems fair to draw the following conclusions:

- It was obvious that the policy adjustments half-way the project were necessary. There was too much divergence within the team with regard to both the interpretation and the implementation of policy elements. It is clear now that the (re)definition of the *skopos* of the translation was considered helpful and a positive step forward.
- More recently produced drafts do reflect a more consistent approach to translation and a reflection of a more common understanding of a *skopos*-oriented approach.
- What we all learned from this experience is that documentation of translation philosophy and methodology needs to be as focused, concrete and unambiguous as possible, right from the start of a project. The higher the number of experts involved, the more crucial this is.

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