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Bibles and Bananas: The Vertical Axis of Translation Relations

Let's start with the math. For any three languages there are 3 × 2 = 6 different translation relations: French⇨Russian, Russian⇨French; French⇨German, German⇨French; Russian⇨German and German⇨Russian. Among any four there are 4 × 3 = 12; for n languages there are $n \times (n-1)$ directions of translation possible. So, since there are approximately seven thousand known languages in the world, there are 24,496,500 pairs of languages between which translation could in principle take place in either direction, giving rise to nearly 49 million potentially separate translation practices, each with its own tools and conventions. Translation is a universal capacity of human societies, and a level playing field of that size cannot be ruled out on purely theoretical grounds. In reality, however, the number of language pairs with established practices of translation is infinitesimal compared with all those that could exist.

Translation does not happen every which way nowadays and never has. But in which ways does it happen? The fundamental answer, though a very broad one, is that it happens either UP or DOWN. As these are technical terms of my own invention, I've put them in small capitals.

Every human language serves as a full means of communication for some community, and in that sense there is no hierarchy

among them. But acts of translation, which are rarely isolated events, typically exploit and support an asymmetrical relationship between source and target tongues.

Translation UP is toward a language of greater prestige than the source. The prestige may be the fruit of ancient tradition—as it was when Akkadian was translated into Sumerian in the Assyrian era, for example, or when translation into Latin was used to spread news of Marco Polo's adventures far and wide (see page 198). At other times UP may be toward a language with a larger readership—typically, when then the target tongue is used, like French in nineteenth-century Russia, as a vehicle of intercultural communication. It may also simply be the language of the conquerors, or of a people with greater economic power, such as Russian in the Central Asian lands in the period of the U.S.S.R. Prestige can be located in a language also because it is the preferred vehicle of religious truths. Arabic, Latin, and Sanskrit, among others, have played this role at different times.

Translation DOWN is toward a vernacular with a smaller audience than the source, or toward one with less cultural, economic, or religious prestige, or one not used as a vehicular tongue. Translation from German into Hungarian during the dual kingdom of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, for example, was DOWN, as is translation from English nowadays into any other tongue.

The rank order of languages when seen as pairs is extremely hard for any individual act of translation to shift, but it is not stable over long periods of time. Sumerian, Greek, Syriac, Latin, English, and French, to take obvious examples, have seen their places in the pecking order change dramatically over the centuries. In addition, the ranking is often not all-encompassing. In specific fields, the relationship can be reversed or substantially modified. The standing of German as the language of a prestigious philosophical tradition means that shifting Kant, Hegel,

or Heidegger into English (or French) is usually handled by translators as if they were translating DOWN; the translations of French novels into English in the nineteenth century exhibited the most obvious signs of that same direction of travel.

What distinguishes translating UP from translating DOWN is this: translations toward the more general and more prestigious tongue are characteristically highly adaptive, erasing most of the traces of the text's foreign origin; whereas translations DOWN tend to leave a visible residue of the source, because in those circumstances foreignness itself carries prestige. When Marcel Duhamel launched the Série Noire crime-fiction imprint in Paris just after the Second World War, for example, he ensured that the translations of the American novels he aimed to make popular in France used plenty of Americanisms in French. He went further: he insisted that his French-language authors (who provided more than half the texts) adopt American-sounding pseudonyms to deceive readers into thinking they were getting the real thing.

However, the complexity and contradictions of language hierarchies are most richly illustrated by the history of Bible translation—in the West, to begin with, but subsequently worldwide.

Bible translation got off to a slow start. The first foreign-language version of the Jewish Torah was the Septuagint, written in *koiné* Greek around 236 B.C.E. (see pages 105–106). Other Greek-language versions followed, but it was not until shortly before the start of the Christian era that it came into Latin, around the same time that the Jews themselves began writing down the oral translations they had long practiced to make their holy texts accessible in Aramaic. Five centuries later there were still only eleven languages possessing versions of the Old and New Testaments (Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Old Gothic, Ge'ez, and Persian); and five more centuries were needed for the total to grow to nineteen, around

the end of the first millennium. By the time printing was invented in the late fifteenth century, there were maybe fifty; by 1600 there were sixty-one, by 1700 there were seventy-four, and by 1800 there were eighty-one. A remarkable number, admittedly, but small change compared to what happened thereafter. In the course of the nineteenth century, more than five new languages were added every year, bringing the total to 620 by the turn of the twentieth century. Then things really began to shift. On average, one new Bible translation was completed *every month* between 1900 and 1999, and so, by the year 2000, the number of languages possessing all or part of the Old and New Testaments in translation shot up to 2,403.[1]

Despite its roots in ancient and medieval times, in quantitative terms Bible translation is a preponderantly twentieth-century affair. Throughout many decades of that era, much of it was overseen by one man, Eugene Nida, who was treated as the most respected authority on Bible translation in the world.

Nida never translated the Bible himself. He worked as linguistic consultant to the United Bible Societies, helping to exercise quality control over a great number of Bible translation projects that arose after the Second World War. In that capacity, he lectured all over the world and sought to explain in layman's terms some of the contentious issues of language and culture that have been tackled from a different perspective in chapters of this book.

Nida made a distinction between two kinds of equivalence in translation: formal equivalence, where the order of words and their standard or common meanings correspond closely to the syntax and vocabulary of the source; and dynamic equivalence (later renamed functional equivalence), where the translator substitutes for source-text expressions other ways of saying things with roughly the same force in the culture of the receiving society. He was an unashamed proponent of the view that, as far

as the Bible was concerned, only dynamic equivalence would do. In that sense he was renewing the translator's defense of the right to be free and not "literal." Nida's overriding concern, which is also that of the United Bible Societies, was that the holy scriptures be brought to all people—and that what is brought to them be the scriptures, as nearly as can be managed. A Bible that makes no immediate sense in the target language, or Bibles that can be read or understood only by trained theologians or priests, are not well suited to missionaries' aims. Nida's preference for dynamic equivalence was in the first place an encouragement to translators to sacrifice whatever was necessary to "get the message across." As he titled one of the chapters of the handbook he co-authored with Jan de Waard: "Translating Means Translating Meaning."[2]

As explained on page 169, this approach is characteristic of translating UP. Yet the source languages of the scriptures—Hebrew, Greek, and Latin—are still, without doubt, and especially for adherents to the faith, much nearer the essence of the texts' religious meaning than any of the vernacular translations they could turn out. Seen in this light, twentieth-century Bible translation ought to be the largest case study we have of translating DOWN—translating from a language of prestige to a local idiom, from a "general language of truth" to a specific vernacular. However, the majority of Bible translations that Nida oversaw were not from Greek or Latin (and Hebrew even less) but from the American versions of the Bible in English, and from two influential Spanish versions, the Reina-Valera of 1909 and a simplified text called *Dios Habla Hoy* ("God Speaks Today").[3] These are, of course, the "general languages" or "dominant idioms" in many parts of the world nowadays.

Retranslation (translating a text that is already a translation) is not a modern departure for the Bible. Only the Aramaic *targums* and the Greek Septuagint were translated directly from

biblical Hebrew. The Armenian, Coptic, Old Latin, Syriac, Ge'ez, Persian, and Arabic translations of the Old Testament were done from the Greek; the Georgian Bible was probably first translated from Armenian (though it may have also used the Syriac and the Greek); the Old Gothic likewise, probably with some reference to Latin versions. Jerome used Hebrew and Aramaic texts to complement the Septuagint for his long-influential version of the Old Testament in Latin, and the original Greek for the New Testament. Early German translations of the Bible in the fifteenth century were done from Jerome's Latin, as were the first Bibles in Swedish. Martin Luther was the first among European translators to use Greek and Hebrew as source texts; his German formulations were, however, copied by many translators into other European languages, who sometimes used Luther's version as their sole source (the Icelandic Bible is a case in point). The Bible was not translated into French until the sixteenth century—from Latin and Italian, not from Hebrew or Greek. The first complete English Bible, by Miles Coverdale, also had no contact with the original languages but drew on Jerome's Latin, a later Latin translation by Erasmus, and Luther's German. The use of modern European translations to retranslate the scriptures into nearly two thousand mostly non-European tongues in the last hundred years is therefore no innovation in the long history of these texts, but it raises issues of great magnitude. It confirms and drives the perception of English and Spanish, not of Hebrew or Greek, as "languages of truth"; their status as the source for Bible translation is hard to separate from the political, economic, and cultural status of the speakers of these two vehicular tongues.

Translating DOWN from a dominant to a vernacular language is typically accompanied by substantial imports of vocabulary and syntactic constructions from the source. Such was the process that enriched and expanded Syriac when it was used as a

vehicle for the preservation of Greek medicine and astronomy. Such was the process that altered and enhanced French when it became the target language for mass translation from Italian in the sixteenth century. Such was the process that Schleiermacher strongly recommended for German as the recipient of the treasures of Greek philosophy in the early nineteenth century. Target-language modification was also, in fact, the fate of English at the hands of the translation committee established by King James I. "The Lord Our God," for instance, is less a Jacobean way of expressing the first-person plural possessive in English than it is a calque of Hebrew grammar: the corresponding expression in the Torah, ה׳ אלהינו, pronounced "adonai ilehenu," can be worded out as "God, the Lord-Our."

The spread of English-language terms in the field of electronic communications into almost all the vehicular languages of the world (*computer, Internet, to surf, hardware, USB*, and so forth) is a contemporary reminder of what a language hierarchy is. The French would rather not be so reminded, and their government set up the Commission Générale de Terminologie et de Néologie in 1996 to push back the tide of foreign words. It may have more success than King Canute, but I wouldn't bet on it.

Target-language modification through translations of prestigious works from a language of higher status may in some instances be imposed on the receiving cultures, but in most cases it is not. More characteristically, it arises from the wishes and needs of the translating community itself. (It hardly needs pointing out that there were no "Hebrews" around to spur King James's translators to bend English into shapes more typical of Hebrew grammar.) But Bible translation in the twentieth century is a different kettle of fish. The agents of modern Bible translation into indigenous languages are closely involved in the missionizing project itself, and many of them are American as well.

They work into languages they have learned long after the

critical age of language acquisition—they are what we termed L2 translators on page 60 of this book. They therefore run the same kind of risk of creating unintentionally comical or offensive effects as do the creators of international signage in Croatian seaside hotels. Nida's main concern was to try to ensure they did not.

Bible translation into non-European languages, which began with European colonial expansion as early as the seventeenth century, was highly inventive from the start. Albert Cornelius Ruyl, a junior trader in the Dutch East India Company with unusual linguistic skills, first taught himself Malay—a regional contact language—when he began his service in Sumatra. He wrote a grammar, then translated the Gospel of Matthew from Dutch. Ruyl altered and adapted Malay as he went along, using words from Arabic, Portuguese, and Sanskrit when he knew no corresponding term in Malay. But he also did something more.

Where the Dutch version of Matthew talks of a fig tree, Ruyl's version has *pisang*—which means a banana tree in Malay. The substitution was justified by the fact that there were no figs on Sumatra. But what really marks it as special is that it signals a new ideology in the age-old business of translating DOWN. Ruyl initiated the principle of cultural substitution that Nida would theorize and promote three centuries later.

From Hebrew into Greek, from Greek into Latin, from Syriac into Arabic, and so forth, when the receiving language didn't have a word for some item, it got a new one—the word of the source language, adapted to its new linguistic home. Not so from Dutch into Malay. The receiving language did not get a new word for a new thing. It got a substitute thing, with its existing word.

Douglas Hofstadter once asked, "How do you say 'jazzercise' in Aramaic?" He meant it as a mind game, not as a question about what the small group of Aramaic speakers in contempo-

rary Jerusalem would say if they joined a gym and found themselves doing aerobics to a Dave Brubeck track. There is no reason why speakers in the ancient world should have had a word for a thing they did not have, but speakers of Aramaic or any other language today would have to choose one of three ways of making up a word for *jazzercise.* They might import the word as it stands, making whatever modifications in form that are needed to allow it to function in a sentence. Or they might take two Aramaic words with meanings analogous to "syncopated music" and "exercise" and run them together to make a new compound in imitation of the English. Finally, they might take an existing Aramaic word and expand its use to include musical stretch-and-jump. Those are the three ways in which new things can be represented in any receiving language—by a foreignism (the first option), a calque (second option), or a semantic expansion. Each of them changes the target language by one item, with possible repercussions over time on the use and form of other words. But cultural substitution would simply put some other, more or less analogous activity current in the world of Aramaic speakers in the place of "jazzercising."

That's what Ruyl did to Malay: he didn't invent a new word for a new thing ("fig"), he used an existing word to say something else ("banana"). It worked only because there are no figs on Sumatra. When the referent of a term is available, such as a musical gym in an Aramaic-speaking quarter of Tel Aviv, cultural substitution can't work as a way of translating an exotic term.

Imagine: Sir Walter Raleigh presents Queen Elizabeth I with an amazing root vegetable he's brought back from the New World and beseeches Her Majesty to reward him for the discovery of . . . the turnip. It wouldn't have worked because it was not a turnip. When you have a potato in your hand, you can't call it by the name of anything that you could be holding in your

other hand. "Cultural substitution" is a naming and translation device that is suited exclusively to things that aren't there. You can't just expand the meaning of *turnip* by using it to name things that aren't turnips. Similarly, when Ruyl wrote *pisang* for "fig," he did not expand the meaning of the Malay term. No new class of tree suddenly arose that included both bananas and figs. What this kind of cultural substitution really says is that you can't really understand, and we're not going to try to explain. Have a banana instead.

Analogy-based substitutions are frequent in non-European Bible translations. "White as snow" in the Bible text may become "white as a cockatoo's feathers" in languages spoken in areas where snow has never been seen, or "white as a cotton boll" in some languages of South America. In Asmat, a language spoken in a swampy area of Indonesian Papua where houses are all built on stilts, the parable of the wise builder who builds on stone and the foolish builder who builds on sand turns into a story about a wise builder "who builds a house on stilts made of iron wood . . . while the foolish builder is the one who builds a house on stilts made of white wood" (white wood being used only for temporary hunting shacks, because it rots quickly).[4]

Nida reports examples of even more extensive cultural transpositions he encountered and approved. In many parts of Africa, he says, casting branches in the path of a chief expresses contempt, whereas in the Gospels it is done to mark Jesus's return to Jerusalem as a triumph. Similarly, fasting is not easily seen as a form of devotion in many parts of the world—it is more likely to be understood as an insult to God.[5] Revision of the Gospel's account of Palm Sunday and of the role of fasting in the Old Testament is both absolutely necessary to avoid giving the wrong message to African readers and at the same time impossible without profoundly altering the story being told. Nida's job was to help produce texts that were functionally equivalent to the

Bible considered not as sacred script but as the repository of a sacred story.

Nida also promoted the use of native speakers of indigenous languages as full partners and, wherever possible, as prime movers in Bible translation projects. That's because reliable judgments about the appropriateness of cultural substitutes are not easily made by L2 speakers. If acceptability is the paramount aim, then L1 speakers are in a much better position to invent and adapt. Their intuitions about acceptability are the ones that count.

Nida's insistence on adaptive translation can be understood in two ways. First, it follows from the beliefs he shares with other Christians that a religious truth must be accessible to all humans, whatever their culture and language. Equally important, however, is Nida's wish to respect the cultures that Bible translators inevitably affect and alter by their work. Adaptive translation is a compromise between these two contradictory aspirations. It helps the receiving culture accept and integrate something completely new by using terms that are already familiar.

Nida's position is not popular among translation-studies scholars, particularly those mainly concerned with the translation of literary works. They might point out how preposterous it would be in the translation of an oral epic from an African language into English to replace *banyan* with *chestnut* on the grounds that banyan trees are nowhere to be seen in England's green and pleasant land. Such attacks miss the main point, which is this: translating UP doesn't normally use the same techniques as translating DOWN. There's no good reason to think that a single undifferentiated set of practices or principles should or ever will hold sway over the whole vast field of translation. The hierarchical relationship between source and target isn't the sole determinant of the methods that translators may use, but it affects quite fundamentally what they do and how they do it.

Cultural substitution, for example, can at times be used in translating UP, but to different effect. Arthur Waley's influential translations of Chinese and Japanese poetry and prose give us English-sounding "Lords" and "Ladies" in place of altogether different social ranks in the ancient societies of the Far East. Waley's reasons for making these substitutions are as complicated as Nida's approval of *cockatoo* in place of *snow*. On the one hand, "Lords" and "Ladies" protects English-language readers from having to acquire too much arcane information about a culture they don't especially wish to learn about. On the other hand, the use of domestic markers of high status reinvests the foreign society represented with recognizable signals of prestige, and thus makes it worth learning about. Translators' strategic decisions are always two-edged swords.

The technique that seems furthest removed from cultural substitution is the intentional alteration of the target language. Bible translation once again provides us with some extreme examples. In the twentieth century, several scholarly Bible retranslation projects have sought to restore the foreignness of the scriptures for readers already familiar with them in more adaptive forms. The Context Group of the Society of Biblical Literature, for example, argues that "the Bible is not a Western Book" and that it was "not written for us."[6] Members of the group point out that because language cannot be isolated from the social context in which it is embedded, and because the ancient Middle East is a completely alien land, the Hebrew Bible cannot be fully represented in a translation that makes ordinary sense today.[7] Their program of defamiliarizing biblical texts follows in the footsteps of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Jewish theologians who retranslated the Old Testament into German in the 1920s so as to restore what they saw as the poetic, religious, and communal characteristics of their faith as it was in the beginning.[8] To achieve this, they reproduce the word repetitions and

patterns of sound found in the Hebrew at the expense of easy legibility. Thus, where Exodus 3:14–15 in a barely updated version of the King James translation of 1611 is fairly accessible—

> And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM; and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations

—the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, which respects the line breaks of the Hebrew, as well as many other features of that ancient tongue, would sound something like this if it were put into English in like manner:

> God said to Moshe:
> I will be-there howsoever I will be-there.
> And he said:
> Thus shall you say to the Children of Israel:
> I AM THERE sends me to you.
> And God said further to Moshe:
> This shall you say to the Children of Israel:
> HE,
> the God of your fathers
> the God of Avraham, the God
> of Yitzhak, and the God of Yaakov,
> sends me to you.
> That is my name for the ages,
> that is my title
> generation unto generation.[9]

Both Nida and Buber were concerned with translating from a "language of truth" into a vernacular—both were translating DOWN, as were Luther, Ruyl, and King James's translators. One major difference among them lies not in the direction of travel but in the broader location of their particular language pairs in the world hierarchy of tongues: Hebrew, German, Dutch, and Malay occupy places that are not interchangeable with one another. But the main difference is what the translators thought their respective audiences needed and desired. For Ruyl, seventeenth-century Sumatrans needed to learn the story and its overall meaning; but in Buber's mind, what German Jews in the Weimar Republic needed to learn was what the authentic, original community of Jews had believed. These differences produce curious flips and loops in translation history, whose course has been more sinuous than any theory can easily accommodate.

Buber's "foreignizing" approach is characteristic of those major programs of translations DOWN—from Greek into Syriac, Italian into French, and Latin into most Western languages—that have left lasting imprints on the receiving language. Ruyl's and Nida's strongly adaptive approach, on the other hand, is obviously more often found in translations UP—from vernaculars, be they regional or exotic, into central languages that don't want to know too much about the source. Modern Bible translation has thus produced a reversal of age-old trends.

By insisting on as much respect for the (foreign) target culture as possible, Nida's recommended style of translating scriptures DOWN applies procedures more commonly found in translations UP; whereas the exoticizing style of Buber (and, after him, of Henri Meschonnic in France), which has been more typically applied to translation DOWN in the last few thousand years, is motivated by scrupulous respect for the radical difference of a now almost inaccessible culture and form of speech.

Both methodologies seek to pay respect where respect is due:

there is no conflict in overall motivation. But where Buber has little respect for the linguistic norms of contemporary German, Nida doesn't think that the specific qualities of snow matter very much when set beside the overriding aim of getting the message across.

The degree to which either of these ideas of translation can affect the receiving language and culture doesn't really depend on their intrinsic merits as translation methodologies or on the brilliance of their users. It depends on volume. Leaving the special features of Bible translation to the side, we can say that the reciprocal flow of translations between any two languages is never equal and in most cases utterly unbalanced. The direction of flow is the key to understanding which way is UP, and what happens down below.