Concepts in Translation: a Case of Cognitive Variation

Yekaterina Yakovenko[1][0000-0003-4372-7704]

[1] Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

yakovenko_k@rambler.ru

Abstract. Combining cognitive and translational approaches to biblical texts (Bible translations into English and German and their sources), we reveal a considerable number of lexico-grammatical and, what is more important, conceptual discrepancies between them. In particular, it is not clear whether one should see in source texts and translations either different realizations of a single biblical concept or the correlation of similar but not identical concepts, each having a structure and a nominative field of its own. We suppose that the given problem can be treated in terms of cognitive variation. One can claim, for instance, that a biblical concept is characterized by the sum of the occurrences of the corresponding polysemantic lexical unit in the source text. Its equivalents appearing in translations are but realizations of the invariant represented by the biblical concept. Thus, concepts represented in secondary texts, in particular, biblical translations, differ from the invariant in both form and content. As a result the text of the translation creates a new or, rather, an altered system of concepts with new means of their expression, as can be observed in biblical translations.

Keywords: nominative field of the concept, lingual image, cognitive change.

1   Concepts in Translation

The term "concept" as a key term of cognitive linguistics is still most controversial, in spite of its widespread, and gives way to different interpretations. We view the concept as the sum of linguistic and cultural data, including those that are rendered implicitly. The concept relates to a certain fragment of reality and is embodied (though not completely) in a linguistic sign or signs and can be thus modelled. The concept reflects categorical and evaluative characteristics of the object and its structure contains features relevant for the particular culture. Being a mental phenomenon, the concept can never be thoroughly investigated but in the course of its analysis one can achieve at least a certain degree of completion. Guided by early cognitive studies (Wierzbicka 1980; 1985, Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987, Langacker 1991) as well as more recent studies in cognitive semantics (Evans 2009, Pederson 2007, Lemmens 2015 and others), we claim indissolubility of linguistic and mental phenomena and believe that concepts and language units serving for their expression should be considered simultaneously.

The reflection of the concept in the language or in the text, or, rather, its projection on the language or text, is constituted by the sum of usages of words and expressions serving to nominate the concept in question. We claim that this reflection is the lingual image of the concept, acquiring specific expression in any language it appears. The lingual image is the core of the concept, its verbalized part, and its analysis engages data of not only lexical, but also grammatical and stylistic character, as well as its historic and cultural background. We have to admit that the lingual image is rather a model of linguistic description than a name for a class of referents (Yakovenko 2007).

Combining cognitive and translational approaches to biblical texts (Bible translations into English and German and their sources), we reveal a considerable number of lexico-grammatical and, what is more important, conceptual discrepancies between them.

Such differences were investigated in biblical studies and, generally, translational studies from the point of view of equivalence theory (Waard, Nida 1986) which later took a considerable cultural turn reinforced by either author-oriented or translator-oriented positions of scholars (Editing the Bible 2012, Venuti 2012 and others).

The problem of how these discrepancies should be treated in cognitive linguistics remains debatable (Kotin 1996). In particular, it is not clear whether one should see in source texts and translations either different realizations of a single biblical concept or the correlation of similar but not identical concepts, each having a structure and a nominative field of its own.

Claiming that several concepts of narrower scope correspond to the original concept in the translation, the researcher has to state the correlation "one sign - one concept", which, of course, is not always the case in reality. Dividing the initial concept into a number of particular concepts in the translation, the researcher inevitably faces the difficulty of integrating them.

The opposite point of view, which is actually a logical continuation of the previous one, allows such integration but it seems formal. For example, in modern English, as well in the language of the early 17th c. the words eye, fountain, face, appearance, conceit, knowledge, colour, (dis) please, all rendering the polysemantic Hebrew 'ayin 'eye' in the King James Bible, do certainly not serve to form the concept 'eye', but for the first word.

Revealing advantages and drawbacks of both approaches, we suppose that the given problem can be treated in terms of cognitive variation. One can claim, for instance, that a biblical concept is characterized by the sum of the occurrences of the corresponding polysemantic lexical unit in the source text. Its equivalents appearing in translations are but realizations of the invariant represented by the biblical concept. Thus, concepts represented in secondary texts, in particular, biblical translations, differ from the invariant in both form and content. As a result the text of the translation creates a new or, rather, an altered system of concepts with new means of their expression (lingual images), as can be observed in biblical translations.

References

1. Editing the Bible. Assessing the Task Past and Present. John S. Kloppenborg and Judith H. Newman (eds.). Leiden, Boston: Brill (2012).

2. Evans, V. How Words Mean : Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models, and Meaning Construction. Oxford: University Press (2009).

3. Kotin, M. L. Das Weltbild und das Sprachbild in der gotischen Bibel-Übersetzung. In: Kognitive Aspekte der Sprache. Akten des 30. Linguistischen Kolloquiums Gdańsk 1995. Linguistische Arbeiten 360. Max Nimeyer Verlag, 141-145 (1996).

4. Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. Metaphors We Live By. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press (1980).

5. Lakoff, G. Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press (1987).

6. Langacker, R. Concept, Image and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar. Berlin: De Gruyter (1991).

7. Lemmens, M. 2015. Cognitive semantics. In: Nick Riemer. Routledge Handbook of Semantics, 90-115. Routledge (2015).

8. Pederson, E. Cognitive Linguistics and Linguistic Relativity. In: The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics. Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), 1012-1044. Oxford: University Press (2007).

9. Venuti, L. Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice. Routledge (2012).

10. Waard, de J., Nida, E. From One Language to Another. Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating. Nashville; Camden; New York; Thomas Nelson Publishers (1986).

11. Wierzbicka, A. Lingua Mentalis. The Semantics of Natural Language. Sydney; New York; London; Toronto; San Francisco: Academic Press (1980).

12. Wierzbicka, A. Lexicography and Conceptual Analysis. Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers (1985).

13. Yakovenko, Ye. B. Homo biblicus. Yazykovoy obraz cheloveka v angliyskikh i nemetskikh perevodakh biblii (opyt kontseptual'nogo modelirovaniya) (Man's lingual image in English and German Bible translations (experience of conceptual modelling) (In Russian) Moscow: Eidos (2007).