# Translation Committee

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# Style of English

Many existing Psalmody translations suffer from inconsistent English Style. The Canticles are often based on existing English translations (KJV or Brenton), and so have a more traditional style. The hymns unique to the Psalmody are of course translated from scratch, often in more modern English, and English that does not flow or even hold together as valid syntactically because it is too literal a translation of the Coptic.

These translations have served well when the Copts have been made up primarily of immigrants, and the children of immigrants who are familiar with Arabic. However, as an increasing number of youth are emerging who know no language but English, it is becoming increasingly needful to have an English translation of the Psalmody that flows well in English.

The first step in producing such an edition is to select a style to be maintained consistently throughout. There are four options to select from:

* Traditional English as found in the King James Version or Brenton’s Septuagint.
* Traditional English modified to retain the archaic form and poetic beauty, but revised to remove any constructs or vocabulary that has become to obscure to be readily understood. The Third Millennium Bible takes this approach.
* Modern English, such as is found in the Revised Standard Version, or the New English Translation of the Septuagint.
* Modern English, modified to retain the archaic pronouns and verb forms when referring to the divinity only, as found in the Kitchener translations of the Liturgy and Psalmody.

## Traditional English

The first option can be readily rejected in favour of the second. There is no reason to retain English that has become so archaic that it is no longer understood in a translation for English speakers today. The second option is the preferred choice of this committee. Just as the formal Arabic of the Liturgy is substantially different and more formal than casual, spoken Arabic, it is fitting to pray the Liturgy in more formal English. The beauty of the King James Version cannot be matched in modern English. However, it is not feasible to produce such an edition. While this committee readily understands the English of the King James Version, it is not the language we speak. We do not have the skill to reproduce such exalted English. It would also be problematic to do so, since the majority of Copts still have English as a second language, and such archaic English presents an unreasonable barrier. Modern English is what we speak, and it is the only language we are able to produce. Modern should not, however, be confused with informal. While modern English is simpler than, and cannot match the beauty of Elizabethan English, it is perfectly possible to write either formally or informally in modern English.

## Modern English with Archaic Forms Retained for the Divinity

The preference of H.H. Pope Shenouda III was to retain the archaic pronouns (e.g. Thee and Thou) when referring to the Divinity only, and to match connected verbs (usually by adding the ‘est’ ending). The rational given was that whenever anyone prays “Our Father”, the older English is used. While the intention, of finding a compromise between understandability and respectful language is laudable, this solution leaves much to be desired. It is easiest to understand this by comparing old English pronouns to other languages which still retain the same level of distinction.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Form | KJV English | Modern English | French | German |
| 2nd person singular | Thou | You | Tu | Du |
| 2nd person plural | You | You | Vous | Sie or Ihr |
| 2nd person plural | Ye | You | Vous | Sie or Ihr |

Notice something interesting: KJV uses ‘Thou’ as the informal form of ‘you’ or ‘ye’, and ‘you’ as the formal form of ‘you’. Today we have reversed the meaning. KJV selected ‘Thou’, equivalent to ‘tu’, as an informal or personal form of address when referring to the divinity because Christ has abolished the dividing wall, and made us Sons by adoption. So we address our Father personally, as we would address our earthly fathers. ’You’ or ‘ye’ are used when addressing a group of people, or when addressing an individual in a respectful/distant manner, as “Vous” is used today in French.

It is perfectly valid to use the archaic forms in this way. That is simple valid (if unusual today) English. However, the Coptic convention of using “Thou” for the divinity and “You” for all else, actually reverses the meaning of the words in the English language. We have made “Thou” the respectful form, when it is in fact the informal form, and made “You” the formal form when it is in fact the informal form. To anyone who understands English natively, hearing the Coptic liturgy means hearing God alone addressed without respect, while all others are shown respect! Note: this is entirely different than using the archaic forms correctly and consistently to all. If we address Our Father in Heaven personally as “Thou”, surely we should also address Our Lady, the mother of us all, personally as “Thou”. Such a consistent usage, as in KJV, is not at all disrespectful.

In fact, this Coptic convention of using the singular form for the Divinity and the plural form (which has become the modern singular and plural form) for all others is not valid English at all. It is a bastardized construct. To the native ear, it sounds very ugly and inconsistent to be jumping constantly between two different styles of English, and mixing them in such a way to reverse the meaning of the older form. It is the opinion of this committee that this style should be completely done away with in favour of either consistent traditional English, or consistent modern English (in formal rather than informal form in either case). However, since (as it has been put), a monkey could translate between modern English and this artificial Coptic construct, a secondary edition is produced in this form for those who insist that it is wrong to address our God otherwise.

## Modern English

By know it should be clear that the style selected by this committee is Modern English. Some have said that it is not fitting to Praise God in “street English” This is a straw man argument. Our intention is not to introduce any slang, or fad expressions into the translation! Rather, we intent to use formal, respectful, modern English, as we might use in a courthouse or other formal setting. This style has been used successfully in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and the New English Translation of the Septuagint, neither of which is reasonably accused of vulgarity. While lacking the beauty of either Elizabethan or Victorian formal English, modern formal English is the best compromise between beauty and understandability in a community with many immigrants. Also, in a society where teenagers no longer learn good English in school, where Shakespeare is no longer understood, it is the only tenable approach.