

Direct Translation: Striving for Complete Resemblance¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a readable description of direct translation, an approach that emerges logically from a relevance theoretical perspective on communication. Direct translation is an approach that strives to attain the highest possible level of resemblance to the source text. It does this by transferring the source's communicative clues and requiring readers to familiarise themselves with the its context, an assumption that minimises the need to provide contextually implicit information, explicate figurative language, adopt inclusive language or remove ambiguities. It values a good balance between naturalness and literalness, prioritising naturalness when these two conflict.

1. Introduction

Basing his views on a communication model known as *relevance theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1986; 1995), Ernst-August Gutt (1991; 2000) proposed two approaches two translation based an analogy with direct and indirect

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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reported speech; he called the two approaches *direct translation* and *indirect translation*. Failing to understand Gutt's framework completely, early critics labelled direct and indirect translation as just new names for the age-old distinction between formal and functional equivalence (e.g., Wendland 1997).

Although Gutt objected to equating direct translation with formal equivalence, to my knowledge he never attempted to spell out what a direct translation should look like. Van der Merwe (1999), exploring the possibility of producing a concordant (direct) translation in Afrikaans, made a helpful contribution to understanding what such a translation might look like. In my doctoral dissertation (Smith 2000), I tried to explore the principles that would be applied to produce a direct translation. Unfortunately, relevance theory is so complex and littered with technical jargon that most presentations of the translation approaches based on it are difficult for most readers to follow.

The objective of this article is both modest and ambitious, namely, to describe how direct translation works and to do so with minimal technical language. This goal is modest in that it does not attempt to break new ground. It is ambitious because a readable presentation of a translation model based on relevance theory, keeping technical jargon to a minimum, is no simple task.

2. The purpose of direct translation

There are two kinds of reported speech, namely, direct and indirect quotation. Direct quotation records exactly what another said. If interpreted with the original context in mind, it enables a third party to retrieve the original speaker's exact meaning. Indirect quotation only offers an approximation of what another said, often filtered in terms of what the reporter deems most relevant or interesting; there is usually some loss or distortion of the speaker's intent. Direct and indirect translation are analogous to direct and indirect quotation. Direct translation attempts to translate exactly what the original writer said, while indirect translation filters the message so as to make it more immediately relevant and understandable to the target reader, accepting some loss in meaning.

Every translator knows it is not possible for a translation to convey everything in the original. Complete equivalence cannot be attained. In choosing the

translation approach, translators must decide on the level of resemblance required between the original and the translation. Their decision should take into account that there is a trade-off between the level of resemblance that can be achieved and the amount of effort a reader needs to invest to benefit from greater resemblance. If translators require *complete* resemblance, they should attempt a direct translation realising it will require more effort for readers to understand it. If a lesser level of resemblance will suffice, an indirect translation is preferable because it provides instant “payoff” to readers.

The goal of a direct translation of the Bible is to make accessible to its modern readers as much as possible of the meaning the original would have conveyed to its readers. An indirect translation, by contrast, has a much more modest goal—to produce immediate contextual effects. Indirect translation accepts some loss of resemblance in exchange for instant impact on the reader. These two approaches operate on a continuum (see diagram 1) in which direct translation is a limiting case, striving for complete resemblance, while indirect translation covers the remainder of the continuum covering varying degrees of resemblance. As a translation moves towards the left, it trades interpretive resemblance for instant impact.

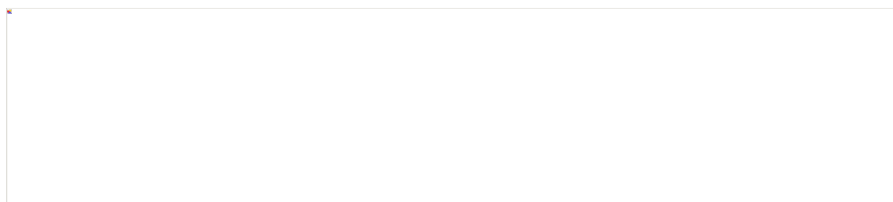


Diagram 1: Target level of interpretive resemblance in direct and indirect translation

Stated differently, the goal of a direct translation of the Bible is to enable its readers access to the same interpretation(s) they could infer if they could read the Hebrew Old Testament or the Greek New Testament. It attempts to provide its readers with as many of the verbal clues present in the source text as is possible in the receptor language. The translation is accurate to the extent that it allows its readers to infer and evaluate all the communicative clues available to a modern reader of the original text. This also serves as the measure of success for a direct translation.

In essence, then, direct translation is an approach that prioritises maximum resemblance over instant impact. It strives for complete resemblance between

source and translation. It aims to provide its readers with exactly the same communicative clues they would have if they could read the original text.

3. The foundation of direct translation

Relevance theory emerged in the late 1980s as an attempt to describe how communication works (see Sperber and Wilson 1986; 1995; Wilson and Sperber 1987). At the time, the prevailing theory was the code model, which assumed that we communicate by encoding and decoding messages. Recognising that the code model provided a hopelessly inadequate explanation of the complexities of communication, Dan Sperber and Diederik Wilson devised an alternate model in which encoding and decoding were only one part. At the simplest level, they suggested that a speaker provides evidence of her intention. A recipient can infer her meaning from the evidence she provides. The evidence (called a stimulus) often takes the form of words (a verbal stimulus). Words on their own do not clearly represent the speaker's meaning (the weakness of the code model); the context in which they are spoken helps to remove ambiguities and thus provide clear evidence of the speaker's intent.

The crucial point here is that the words are not identical with the message. They point to the message, but they need to be contextually enriched to be the message. There is a gap between the words people speak (or write) and the message they intend to convey. The context shared by the speaker and hearer fills the gap so as to make the message clear and complete. If a woman tells her husband, "I'm going upstairs to shower", her words may seem to send a clear message. If, however, you know they have a one-year old child, her real meaning becomes "honey, won't you please watch baby for the next 15 minutes". Similarly, on a cold winter's day, your guest might *say*, "it is cold in here", but his real *intention* is to ask you to close the window (Unger 1996:19). Words function as a clue to the speaker's intentions, but they must combine with contextual factors to produce a complete message.

We can look at a verbal stimulus from two perspectives (Gutt 1991:126). First, we can observe its intrinsic properties and how it functions as a communicative clue to the speaker's intent. Second, we can explore the interpretation it produces when contextually enriched. Direct translation

focuses on the intrinsic properties of the utterances in the source text. It attempts to formulate equivalent communicative clues in the receptor language. To the extent that it succeeds in producing equivalent communicative clues, readers of the translation will reach the same interpretations as readers of the original provided they use the same contextual assumptions to complete the message.

The concept of *communicative clues* is critical. Direct quotation can retain the exact properties of the message it reports. This is not possible across languages. No two languages share their intrinsic properties so closely as to permit a direct transfer of structures and forms. If, however, one can correctly identify how the parts of the original message functioned as communicative clues helping the audience to deduce the writer's intent, then formulating equivalent clues in the receptor language enables readers to recover the full message (at least in theory). The reformulated communicative clues need to interact with the original context in a manner equivalent to the way the original's clues would have done.

4. The principles of direct translation

What are the baseline principles a Bible translation must follow if it hopes to achieve the greatest possible level of interpretive resemblance to its source? Relevance theory provides a framework for determining these principles. There are three essential ones.

1. Direct translation values both the form of the original and the naturalness of the translation. Relevance theory provides a fresh perspective on the quest for balance between literalness and naturalness, between form and meaning. As a result, a good direct translation “is both literal and natural—literal in that it translates what was said rather than what was meant; natural in that it uses forms of expression that are natural in the receptor language” (Smith 2000:70).

A direct translation aims to provide clear communicative clues from which its readers can infer the author-intended meaning. To achieve this, its style needs to be as natural in the receptor language as the original was in the source language. Therefore, direct translation genuinely values a translation using an

idiom natural to the receptor language. A standard, middle-of-the road modern idiom is most appropriate. For modern English, something in the order of the ESV or the NIV seems most appropriate. In my opinion, the KJV is too formal, the NASB too awkward and the Message too colloquial.

At the same time, direct translation also values the form of the original and will remain as close to it as is possible while still providing clear communicative clues in natural idiom. For example, the semantic range of the Greek genitive case overlaps substantially with the way English uses the preposition “of” to join two nouns, and English speakers are comfortable with this usage. Therefore, it is seldom necessary for a direct translation to alter the form of so-called objective or subjective genitives. In 2 Corinthians 5:11, “the fear of the Lord” (NIV) is just as natural to English speakers as was τὸν φόβον τοῦ κυρίου to ancient Greek speakers; a direct translation would not change the form to “what it means to fear the Lord” (GNB).

What should translators do when they face a choice between literalness and naturalness? They should provide clear communicative clues—as clear and natural as the ones in the source text. Naturalness takes priority over literalness. The maxim is, translate literally to the extent that it is clear and reader-friendly in the receptor idiom. In Romans 8:17, it would be inappropriate to translate the Greek phrase συγκληρονόμοι ... Χριστοῦ literally as “fellow heirs of Christ”; for the sake of clarity, the form should change to “fellow heirs with Christ” (ESV), but need not go as far as “we will possess with Christ what God has promised for him” (GNB).

2. Direct translation requires that translators interpret the original correctly in order to translate it effectively. Due to the mechanical nature of producing a literal version, translators can cope with a relatively shallow grasp of the source text by simply matching glosses and forms between two languages. When it comes to the depth of the translators' understanding of the original, direct translation resembles functional equivalence. Translators need a thorough grasp of its intricacies, far beyond the lexical and grammatical level (see Winckler and Van der Merwe 1993:54-55; cf. Gutt 1991:164; Van der Merwe 1999).

The translators' task is to identify the communicative clues the source text provided for its readers and translate them into equivalent clues for the receptor audience. These clues may emerge from any level within the discourse features of the source text. They also depend on the interplay between text and context for their effectiveness. Therefore, producing a good direct translation requires skilful exegesis of the source text, taking into account its “discourse features, rhetorical devices, and social conventions” (Smith 2000:228; cf. Van der Merwe 1999).

3. *Direct translation requires readers to interpret it with the original context in mind.* Winckler and Van der Merwe's (1993:54) definition makes this point well:

A direct translation is a receptor language text which the translator intends the receptor audience to interpret in the context envisaged (by the original author) *for the original audience*. And in making a direct translation the translator has the informative intention to communicate to the receptor language audience *all* the assumptions communicated by the original in the context envisaged for the original.

All communication acts are context-dependent. This is a fundamental principle of relevance theory. If communication is context-dependent, then it is impossible to keep a complex message fundamentally unaltered while permitting the target audience to interpret it using a completely different contextual framework.³ Functional equivalence fails here—it is based on the code model, which wrongly assumes that any message that can be encoded in one language can also be encoded in another. This simply is not true. If messages could be fully encoded, it might be true. But messages are encoded *in context* in such a way that the interplay between code and context produces the full meaning.

A corollary of the content-dependent nature of communication is that a translation which allows readers to assume a contemporary context will suffer

³ Many have protested the legitimacy of requiring readers of a translation to be familiar with the context underlying the original. Gutt (2000) responded persuasively on this point; I shall not rehash his arguments here.

greater loss of resemblance to its source than one which requires them to be familiar with the original context. It follows, therefore, that a translation which strives for maximum resemblance must require readers to interpret it with the original context in mind.⁴

These three principles emerge directly from relevance theory. To produce a translation that achieves maximum resemblance to its source, translators must (a) value both naturalness and literalness, (b) interpret the original correctly and (c) assume readers will interpret the translation with the original context in mind. Translators can use these principles as guidelines for making difficult translation decisions.

5. The application of direct translation

Now we need to grapple a little with how a direct translation should handle some of the most common and important translation problems modern Bible translators face. I have selected four for discussion: (a) implicit information, (b) metaphorical language, (c) inclusive language and (d) ambiguous texts.

5.1. Implicit information

How should a direct translation of the Bible handle information that is implicit in the original, but will be lost in a literal rendering? To what extent should it add clarifying words or phrases in an attempt to make explicit to the reader what is implicit in the original?

Relevance theory offers a satisfactory account of the role implicit information plays in communication, but that account is too complex to explain here (cf. Gutt 1996; Unger 1996). All I shall attempt here is a simplified account of how direct translation handles implicit information.

Firstly, we need to distinguish between *linguistically* and *contextually* implicit information. Linguistically implicit information is required for the sake of

⁴ One means of helping to reduce the burden on readers to familiarise themselves with the context of the source is by including notes containing essential background information. This option is more feasible for translations that will be published electronically than for printed Bibles.

grammatical correctness and completeness. For example, 1 Timothy 1:3 begins with *καθώς* (“just as”), “a construction that needs a ‘so now’ to complete it” (Fee 1988:48). Although “so now” is omitted in the Greek text, grammatical correctness requires it to be supplied. The “so now” clause is linguistically implicit because the sentence is not grammatically complete without it. From a relevance theoretic perspective, the missing words are judged to be part of the communicative clue, so a direct translation should supply them.

Contextually implicit information is information that is derived purely from the external context; in other words, it is not implied by the syntax of the language. In Revelation 3:15, the Laodicean church is rebuked for being “neither cold nor hot” (NIV). To appreciate the force these words had on the original readers, one needs to know that Laodicea had no water source of its own, but received its hot and cold water from nearby water sources. All their water was lukewarm by the time it reached them. Although the author surely had this information in mind when he penned 3:15-16, it is not implicit in the text itself, but in the external context. Because direct translation presupposes readers will use the original context to interpret it, it does not explicate contextually implicit information.

This distinction between two main types of implicit information tends to simplify and polarise the situation too much. We cannot always draw a line neatly between the two. Nevertheless, the general principle would be for direct translation to lean towards making linguistically implicit information explicit, but leaving contextual clues implicit.

5.2. Metaphorical language

Functional equivalence permits and, in certain situations, actively encourages translations to convert figures of speech that will not be easily understood by modern readers into literal statements. In the case of metaphors, this usually means identifying the main point of comparison and spelling it out for readers, converting a metaphor into a proposition. Relevance theory's view of metaphors makes this method incompatible with a translation that strives for complete resemblance with its source.

Whereas literal expressions make a single, direct statement about a subject, figurative language tends to project a range weak implications upon it (see Sperber and Wilson 1986:231-237). The famous words of Psalm 23:1, יהוה רעי, usually translated literally as “the Lord is my shepherd”, illustrate the point well. What is the main point of comparison the psalmist intends between Yahweh and a shepherd? Is it protection, guidance, care, nourishment? The answer is *none* of these . . . and *all* of them. The Lord does for his people many of the things a shepherd does for his sheep. If a translator, judging that modern city dwellers know nothing about ancient shepherding, chose to explicate the statement as “the Lord takes care of me”, she would rob the reader of access to a whole range of ways in which the Lord shepherds his people.

Converting metaphors into propositions seriously distorts the message, overemphasising certain implications and completely disregarding others. Direct translation, therefore, must render metaphors literally, expecting readers to familiarise themselves with culture and context from which the metaphor derives its force.

5.3. Inclusive language

Many early twenty-first century cultures have become highly sensitive to gender-related issues, especially any perceived gender bias. This has led to a proliferation of recent Bible translations (or revisions) adopting inclusive language where the Hebrew or Greek text uses masculine language to refer to both men and women. The goal is to produce gender-neutral translations that do not cause unnecessary offence or misunderstanding on the part of gender-sensitive modern readers. The NRSV, NLT and TNIV are examples of major English translations that employ inclusive language. Even recent translations that do not formally adopt inclusive language show much greater sensitivity to the matter than was the case 30 years ago; the ESV is a good example (see Decker 2004).

There are two questions of importance to this article: (a) Should a direct translation use inclusive language at all? (b) If yes, to what extent?

When interpreted with the original context in mind, a direct translation should provide clear communicative clues to the author's intended meaning. “The test of a good direct translation is that when interpreted in the context envisioned for the original readers it yields the author-intended interpretation” (Smith 2000:82). In the vast majority of cases where the original biblical text uses masculine language with the intent of including both genders, it will make no difference whether or not the translation uses inclusive language. If a modern reader were to use a first-century worldview to interpret Matthew 12:30, it would hardly matter whether ὁ μὴ ὄν μετ’ ἐμοῦ κατ’ ἐμοῦ ἐστίν were rendered “he who is not with me is against me” (NIV) or “whoever is not with me is against me” (NRSV). The suggestion I made eight years ago seems even more appropriate today than it did then:

In general, a direct translation should not depart from the form of the original unless that is required for the sake of preserving its communicative clues. However, if translating for readers who are known to be sensitive to feminist issues and lacking the space to provide explanatory notes that alter the readers’ cognitive environment, translators are free to employ inclusive renderings so as to prevent communication breakdowns (Smith 2000:82).

The answer to the first question—should a direct translation use inclusive language at all?—is that it is free to do so if this does not distort the meaning. However, for a translation assuming an ancient context, inclusive language is not essential and should be avoided if it may distort the interpretation in any way.

Critics of inclusive language point out many examples where a general policy of changing masculine language into gender-neutral language can cause subtle distortions (see Grudem 2002a-b; 2005; Cole 2005; Poythress 2005; Marlowe 2006). Cole's (2005) examination of Psalm 1 sounds a caution regarding a hidden danger. The NIV translated verse 1 “blessed is the man who . . .”; the TNIV altered it to “blessed are those who . . .”, a seemingly harmless instance of changing from masculine to neutral language. The traditional identification of “the blessed man” of Psalm 1 is as a righteous human being. However, a rising tide of scholarly opinion is open to the idea that “the blessed man”

could have been identified with the Messiah by ancient Israelites. The switch from “blessed is he . . .” to “blessed are those . . .” denies modern readers access to a Messianic interpretation of the verse, which violates one of the primary goals of direct translation—to allow modern readers access to the same range of interpretations that were available to the original’s audience.

The New Inclusive Translation of the New Testament and Psalms (NIT) provides a more obvious and extreme example of inclusive language changing the meaning of the original. The NIT chose to refer to God not as “Father”, but as “Father-Mother”. If this title were interpreted with the first-century context in mind, it would evoke in the minds of its readers a totally different array of images to what the ancients would have associated with the Greek title *patēr*. Thus it would make a poor direct translation.

In essence, then, direct translation permits cautious use of inclusive language, but generally favours maintaining the gender of the original so as to minimise the potential for subtle changes in meaning. Since the goal of direct translation is maximum resemblance (in the original context), avoiding inclusive language minimises the risk of unintentional distortions.

5.4. Ambiguous texts

We have established that a direct translation is dependent on the quality of the exegesis underlying it. Since we are so far removed from the biblical writers, many aspects of these ancient texts are ambiguous to us. This raises an important translation question: If a direct translation relies on sound exegesis of the source text, how should it handle elements in the source text that are exegetically ambiguous, that is, elements which could be interpreted in more than one way?

Ambiguities fall into two categories—those that can be reproduced in the receptor language and those that cannot. Psalm 5:3 contains an example of an ambiguity that cannot be retained in translation. The clause אֶעֱרֹךְ לְךָ זֶבֶחַ could mean “I prepare a sacrifice for you” (ESV), “I lay my requests before you” (NIV) or “I will present my case to you” (NET). There is no English construction that makes all three of these interpretations accessible. The age-old dispute about whether to translate πνευματικῶν in 1 Corinthians 12:1

“spiritual gifts”, “spiritual things” or “spiritual ones” also falls in this category. Does the figure of speech *καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἄπτεσθαι* in 1 Corinthians 7:1b mean “it is good for a man not to marry” (NIV text) or “it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman” (NIV margin)? In this case, a translation can sit on the fence by translating the figure literally as “it is good for a man not to touch a woman” (NASB). It is unclear whether *ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ* in 2 Corinthians 5:14 refers to our love for Christ or Christ's love for us. A translation need not take a stance, though, since the English “the love of Christ” retains the ambiguity.

Since direct translation assumes the reader will use the author-intended context to interpret its statements, it does not *need* to alter the wording of the text in an attempt to remove ambiguities. If a statement is grammatically ambiguous in the Hebrew or Greek text, presumably the context would have removed the ambiguity for the original readers.⁵ In direct translation, the translator's task is to provide clues which, when interpreted with the original context in mind, will lead modern readers to the same interpretation as the original would have led its intended readers.

Therefore, where it is possible to leave a verbal ambiguity in the translation, permitting readers to interpret it in the same range of ways someone might interpret the source and relying on the original context for clarity, this is the approach most consistent with the principles of direct translation.

What about cases in which the main text of the translation cannot retain an ambiguity? How should a direct translation handle a problem like the one in Psalm 5:3? The verb *עָרַךְ* means “to get ready, set out in order” (HALOT 1999:884). The ambiguity stems from the fact that no direct object is stated, so the Hebrew text literally reads, “I will set my . . . before you”. To complete the sentence, English translations must supply an object from the context. Some attempts include “requests” (NIV), “sacrifice” (ESV) and “case” (NET). These are supplied based on the translators' attempts to reconstruct the context of the psalm so as to infer what the psalmist had in mind. Since we are so far

⁵ In ordinary communication, it is possible the speaker or author did not provide a clear clue to his/her intended meaning. For those who hold a high view of biblical inspiration, this argument does not apply to the Bible. We believe the Holy Spirit superintended the writing process to ensure the human authors of Scripture recorded his message properly.

removed from the psalmist, the best we can manage is a plausible reconstruction. Each of the three example translations above represents a plausible reconstruction. We do not have enough information to remove the ambiguity.

Since a direct translation strives to give its readers access to the same range of interpretations that were accessible to the intended readers of the original, the best way to manage these kinds of problems is to place one option in the text and the others in explanatory notes. *The NET Bible* (2006, Ps 5:3, n. 6) does this quite well here by adding this note:

tn *Heb* “I will arrange for you.” Some understand a sacrifice or offering as the implied object (cf. NEB “I set out my morning sacrifice”). The present translation assumes that the implied object is the psalmist’s case/request.

This at least gives studious readers access to the interpretations open to modern readers of the psalm in Hebrew, which is the best a translation can hope to achieve.

6. Conclusion

Two different kinds of translation emerge from relevance theory: direct translation, which strives for complete interpretive resemblance, and indirect translation, which prioritises instant impact on readers. Direct translation seeks to retain the linguistic properties of the source text in translation. It cannot do so literally because no two languages share the same formal properties, so instead it transfers them value as communicative clues. In producing equivalent communicative clues, translators should strive to balance naturalness and literalness, prioritising naturalness when these values clash.

The most important principle of direct translation is that it assumes readers will use the original context to complete its communicative clues and recover the author’s intended meaning. As compared with indirect translation, this requires extra effort from readers wishing to understand it correctly, but offers the promise of greater resemblance to the source. This assumption minimises

the need to provide contextually implicit information, explicate figurative language, adopt inclusive language or remove ambiguities.

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