Quality in Translation: A Multi-Threaded Fabric

A Working Symposium sponsored by the Pike Center for Integrative Scholarship and the Nida Institute, in collaboration with SIL International Translation Services, United Bible Societies, Biblica, The Seed Company, and Dallas International University to be held as a hybrid event in June, 2023

Call for Papers

This Call for Papers is a continuation of the Pike Center Symposium Series on Quality in Translation. The Exploratory Symposium, the first in the series (see The Call, and Brief Instructions, which has links to the event program, papers and videos), invited papers on a broad range of topics related to quality in translation. Now, for the second Working Symposium in the series, the theme is narrowed to the "multi-threaded fabric of quality in translation." The Working Symposium takes the view that quality is not uni-dimensional, but that it is composed of many dimensions, or threads. In particular, the Symposium seeks to explore the way in which the many threads of Bible translation are integrated into a common fabric of quality. The threads which emerged from the Exploratory Symposium are: artificial intelligence, translation consulting, hermeneutics and theology, genre and literary features, linguistics, models of translation, processes, and resources.

The Working Symposium seeks a synthetic understanding of how these different aspects, or threads, of a translation project form a cohesive whole. The Working Symposium, then, invites papers that demonstrate how *one* of the threads is an integral part of quality, i.e., for example what the thread of “process” entails, and how this contributes to the overall fabric of quality. It is less interested in the individual fibers of the thread, i.e., specific instances with a narrow range of focus, and more interested in the thread as a whole. During the Working Symposium the editors and authors will work together to come up with a theory about how the different threads are integrated, while also spending time examining the contribution of the individual threads brought forward by the authors. Detailed descriptions of each thread are given below in The Threads as a prompt for further writing on the topic.

The Symposium Series will culminate with a Public Symposium which will be embedded as a track within the BT Conference 2023. At the Public Symposium, the results of the Working Symposium will be shared as authors present a revised version of their work which has already undergone the rigors of scholarly peer review.

Instructions for authors

The deadline for submitting a proposal is **March 3, 2023**. Submit by emailing a DOCX, PDF, or the URL of a shared Google Doc to Steve Watters and Reinier de Blois.

The submission should be an extended abstract of around 1,000 words (with no maximum limit). A program committee will review all of the submissions and select the ones that best fit the theme and that show the most promise for resulting in a well-written scholarly paper for the proceedings of the symposium. Be sure to include a bibliography of the references cited in your extended abstract. Five criteria will be used to evaluate the submissions: relevance to the theme, strength of contribution, strength of argumentation, strength of writing, and strength of bibliography.

The program committee will also provide written feedback that is meant to help in completing the draft for the preliminary proceedings.

The criterion of relevance will be judged primarily on how the abstract fits into The Threads provided below. In particular, authors / co-authors will submit a one-sentence summary identifying the thread in the fabric that their paper discusses, and their understanding of how the thread contributes to the overall fabric of quality. If authors are interested in pursuing a thread that is different from the eight that are mentioned here, they should be explicit about this when submitting the abstract.

The goal of the Working Symposium is to prepare a set of publishable papers in time for the BT Conference 2023. Because of this deadline and limitation, we will only accept 12 papers. We recognize that there may be many more quality submissions than we can accept. Authors will be notified by Mar 24th so that if they are not accepted, they may submit directly to the BT Conference.

Co-authorships and collaborative efforts are encouraged, and will be looked on favorably in the acceptance process.

Authors / co-authors that are accepted will be asked to make a commitment to go through the process of preparing a full paper, participating in the Working Symposium, working with reviewers and editors to get it to a publishable state, and presenting at the BT Conference.

Dates and Deadlines

- *Mar 3* - Extended abstracts due
- *Mar 24* - Notices of acceptance sent out to the authors / co-authors of 12 papers
  Early May - Authors / Co-authors finish full-paper drafts
- *June* - Working Symposium
    - Likely an in-person / online hybrid event
    - Exact dates will be determined on the basis of availability of the authors / co-authors of the 12 papers

- *Summer* - editing, revising, getting papers to publishable quality
- *October* - present at BT Conference under Pike Center / Nida Institute

Program and Editorial committee

Steve Watters, Co-editor

Reinier de Blois, Co-editor

Members of the *Quality in Translation* Steering Committee will review the extended abstracts, as well as help in the editing process after the Working Symposium. These are Dick Kroneman, Phil King, Angeline Foo, Hans Combrink, Brian Kelly, and George Payton.

For any enquiries, please contact: steve_watters@sil.org or rdeblois@biblesocieties.org.

The Threads:

Traditional writings on *quality in translation* focus on the qualities and attributes of the text. They look at and evaluate the rendering of the translators, often showing, for example, how the translators did not transfer the original meaning correctly, or showing how the translators put too much of themselves in the text, or how the translation is wrongly biased to a particular theological or ideological viewpoint. As helpful as these critiques can be, there is little in the published literature that addresses the multidimensional nature of the quality of a translation, and how the individual parts contribute to the overall quality. By multidimensional nature, we do not mean the polyvalent nature of the text, as interesting as this may be, but the many facets that go into shaping the context in which the text is translated, evaluated, and published. The processes by which the text is translated and the contexts which influence these processes necessarily play an important role in quality. The quality of a text is multidimensional or is like a fabric made up of many different threads, and that quality is a composite feature made up of many parts. We would like to further explore these parts by inviting papers on the issues, or threads of thought that emerged from the Exploratory Symposium. These are noted and described briefly in the following sections.

As noted in the introduction, we are looking for papers that address the thread as a whole, and which show how the thread is an integral part of the fabric of quality. Individual examples in support of the points made in the paper are of course welcome.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

It is amazing to witness the tremendous advances that have been made in AI over the last years. And it only makes sense that many have started looking for ways to implement AI in the Bible Translation process. It is exciting to see some of the firstfruits of these developments and we cannot wait to see them implemented!

At the same time, we, in the global BT movement, need to ask ourselves a number of questions. As we believe that the Bible is no ordinary book, is what is possible for secular literature automatically applicable to Bible Translation as well? Could the application of AI have a negative impact on the role and integrity of the mother tongue translator?

These and other questions need to be brought to the table and we want to invite people who have insight in these issues to put their thoughts on paper so that a healthy and balanced discussion can take place.

TRANSLATION CONSULTING

A translation consultant check has been seen as one of the major steps to achieving a quality translation. This step usually entails a one-to-one interaction between translation consultant and translation team, and is often a labor intensive and time consuming process. As the Bible Translation Movement accelerates, the translation consultant pool has not been able to keep with the pace. This has resulted in calls for innovative ways to train and involve more people as translation consultants, as well as innovative ways to check translations, such as “group checking.” What are the innovations that are being applied, and is there evidence that these innovations are addressing the issues as intended?

At the same time that innovations are being applied, there are many issues that might be addressed in the one-to-one interaction of a translation consultant check: using quantitative metrics as an objective measure of quality (# of omissions per chapter, for example), the struggles of working through a poor back translation, and consistency between translation consultants to name a few of the issues.

We seek contributions that explore innovative approaches and provide evidence for their efficacy, as well as contributions that address issues in the traditional approach to translation consulting. We would also welcome contributions which advocate for or against the place of a hard-nosed outside review of the translated text.

HERMENEUTICS / THEOLOGY

Even though there may have been a time that some Bible translators thought that it would be possible to translate the Bible in a theologically “neutral” way, these days most people realize that every translator comes to the table with certain theological presuppositions and biases.

For a long time, these discussions were dominated by Westerners, many of whom shared a common set of hermeneutical principles, as a result of which there were relatively few issues on which people disagreed.

More recently, however, the company around the Bible Translation table has become a lot more diverse, representing cultures and worldviews from all over the globe. As a result, discussions have become significantly more interesting, but also increasingly challenging.

As a global movement, we need to be challenged more, and for that reason we are inviting contributions that help the Bible Translation community find their way amidst these developments.

LITERARY / GENRE

For many years Bible translators were taught that Form and Meaning were two separate entities, and that, during the translation process, our primary focus should be on retaining the latter.

In more recent years, however, the realization has grown that a not insignificant part of the Meaning may actually reside in the Form. The Bible Translation community has begun to understand that some of the power of the Biblical text is directly linked to the beauty (or ugliness!) of its wording! An increasing focus on Old Testament translation has reinforced this. There is a growing awareness that different literary genres require different approaches in translation.

This had led to a growing discussion about how a deeper understanding of the literary aspects of the Biblical texts can contribute to a higher quality translation. How far can translators go in their efforts to find alternative ways to recreate the beauty of the original text in the target language? We are looking for papers that stimulate lively conversations about this subject matter.

LINGUISTICS

The study of linguistics was central to early approaches of Bible translation into unwritten languages, but many believe it has lost relevance in the current era of Bible translation projects. One reason for this decline may be a result of differences in the role of who is involved in a translation project. Traditionally, people from the West had a significant role in many aspects of the translation, and they needed to learn the language and understand how it works to fulfill this role. The study of the language through linguistics was an important tool that enabled that role. Currently, it is not uncommon for most aspects of the project to be driven by mother-tongue speakers. Mother-tongue speakers have control of their language in ways that an outside analyst will never have. Linguistics is less obviously a necessary tool for them, particularly in translation drafting.

We welcome contributions that advocate for or against the relevance of linguistics, specifically as it might contribute to the quality of a Bible where mother-tongue translators have the primary role in the rendering of the translated text. Questions that might be addressed: why is a study of the sound system key to developing a good orthography? Why is the study of discourse key to making a coherent Bible text? Can you not just rely on native-speaker intuition? Whatever the language issue, does the study of linguistics on the part of the mother-tongue speaker actually improve the quality of the Bible text? Case studies and examples are encouraged.

MODELS OF TRANSLATION

The Exploratory Symposium on “Quality in Translation” illustrated well the many models that attempt to capture what it is that happens when what is said in one language is translated into another. The Bible Translation movement has been strongly influenced by Nida’s “meaning-based” model, and the notion that Meaning is separable from Form. In this model, translation is seen as a three-legged stool, requiring a balance between accuracy, clarity, and naturalness. Acceptability has been added to these three, and is known as CANA. But, there are other models that capture the translation process, including models of translation that are in use outside of Bible Translation, such as the models used in translating Blockbuster Hollywood Hits. It has also been pointed out that the metaphors by which we conceive of a translation play an important role in our determination of how we think of translation and what quality might mean.

We welcome insights about the models and metaphors we use for translation as they pertain to our notions of quality. But this brings up the notions that language communities have about the Bible and about translation. What should the Holy Bible look like and sound like in their view? What are their mental models about translation? To what extent do the global BT models overlap or differ from theirs? What is to be done when the global models collide with local ones? Whose model, or conception wins, and why?

PROCESSES

The quality of the Bible text is dependent on the processes the translators take the text through: drafting, comprehension checks, consultant checks, and much much more. These processes, however, are iterative and time consuming. They have come under scrutiny for being unnecessarily slow.

In addition, there is growing concern about who is involved in the traditional processes. Some have argued for involving many more people in the translation drafting process through such things as group drafting workshops or online crowd-sourcing. These methods push the boundaries of what has been understood to be the necessary procedures for producing a quality text. This broader involvement also brings up issues of who manages the process, and verifies that the necessary steps have been taken to achieve a quality text.

This has led to much discussion about who owns quality, and how the BT movement negotiates between the value models asserted in the different viewpoints. Can quality be achieved with a more organic, community-based approach, or must it entail that specialized expertise is brought to bear, or both? What is the role of the church at local, regional and international levels when it comes to owning the quality of Bible translation?

We invite contributions that explain and clarify the differences between the different approaches to the translation process. We also seek papers that provide evidence for how innovative approaches to process achieve quality in the text.

RESOURCES

Over the past years the number of helpful background resources for people engaging in Bible translation has grown exponentially. Platforms such as Paratext and Translator's Workplace give access to numerous helpful tools and databases, such as translation notes, commentaries, lexicons, images, checklists, etc.

Meanwhile, new projects are underway to add to the vast array of existing materials. Slowly but surely we see a tendency towards a better integration of existing data and the use of modern media.

There is also an increasing awareness of the need to make these data more accessible to people who do not speak English. The term "gateway languages" has come up in an effort to chart the most effective routes towards eliminating any remaining stumbling blocks that would keep the Global Church from effectively creating high quality translations of God's Word in all remaining languages.

But there is still room for improvement! How can mother tongue translators across the globe engage with the available resources in such a way that it answers each and every question that they might run into in their daily work? We welcome contributions that deal with these and other, related questions.