

## THE AFRIKAANS TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE FOR THE DEAF

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### Abstract

*The mother tongue of the cultural deaf, that is people who were born deaf, is sign language. Being born deaf involves a severe linguistic handicap. So far, only an English translation for the deaf has been published in the USA in 1992. Although the Afrikaans deaf community requested a written and a visual translation, work started in 1997 on the written translation of the Bible in Afrikaans for the deaf (ABD). The aim is to convey the original text as accurately as possible in the ABD within the linguistic constraints of the language used by the Afrikaans deaf. The panel of translators consist of Old and New Testament scholars, deaf readers, a lifelong language teacher in a school for deaf pupils, and a minister serving already many years in a deaf congregation. Sentences should not be too long, and shorter and better-known words are preferred. The passive constructions, metaphors, abstract and figurative language and rhetorical questions have to be avoided. Yet one should be able to read the text as good Afrikaans.*

### 1. The need for such a translation

The mother tongue of the cultural deaf, that is people who were born deaf, is sign language. People who are able to hear, usually only have a very limited perception of the severe linguistic handicap that being born deaf, involves. Although the visual sign language competence of the deaf is usually well developed, their verbal competence is normally seriously hampered. According to information supplied by DEAFSA (The Deaf Federation of South Africa), the reading competence of the average deaf adult is more or less equivalent to that of an eight-year-old child (or Grade 3-4) in a school for children with normal hearing abilities (Hough 1999:1). This entails an enormous challenge when dealing with the reading of the Bible by the deaf. Even it is true that the deaf are often able to handle difficult concepts, experience has shown that it is extremely difficult for the average deaf person to read the typical Bible translation with adequate comprehension.

So far it seems to be the case that elsewhere in the world only one translation specifically for the deaf has been made – an English translation published in the USA by Baker Book House in 1992 (*World Bible Translation and Centre* 1992). In the light of this proven need, the Afrikaans deaf community was consulted from 1984 on and eventually the *Bible Society of South Africa* was approached with the request for the translation of the Bible in Afrikaans. Interestingly enough the deaf requested two translations: a written and a visual translation. The written translation should be sensitive to the linguistic handicaps of the deaf and should also take into consideration the peculiarities of the Afrikaans deaf language, as it has developed through the years. It is understood that the visual translation will be a next phase as it is virtually impossible to tackle that project without having first the basis of a written translation. The costs involved in a visual translation will probably also prove to be a major drawback. With a view to the theme of this conference, it should be emphasised that Afrikaans is an indigenous language on the continent of Africa, and that such a translation should also be seen as part of the contextualisation of the Bible in Africa.

Work on the *Afrikaans Bible for the Deaf* (ABD) started in the beginning of 1997, and steady progress has been made so far. A proof publication of *Genesis* and the *Gospel of Mark* has been published in 1998 and made available for comment to deaf readers and the churches involved. In the meantime the translation process is continuing, and the books completed are being made available regularly to a panel of readers from different churches. This panel includes people well acquainted with the challenges of communication to the deaf, as well as deaf readers<sup>1</sup>. The Minor Prophets have now also been published and the Four Gospels are currently in the press.

The procedure followed is that a book is translated as directly as possible by one of the Biblical scholars. Often specific problems are highlighted for the next phase by way of a footnote. This phase is then submitted for revision to the members on the panel who are themselves deaf or who know Deaf Afrikaans. The revision by the "deaf committee" is then submitted to the full panel meeting in regular intervals for a whole week in Cape Town. There the translation is finalized, after which it is submitted to a broader panel of the Bible Society of South Africa nominated by churches and interest groups. The translation is also continually being evaluated in the deaf congregations at Bible studies as well as with deaf children at school. Whenever the panel is in doubt, specific issues are tested with selected groups of deaf readers. The final phase is when the proposals of the broader panel of evaluators and feedback from other groups are considered again by the full panel meeting in Cape Town.

## **2. Points of departure in a translation for the deaf**

It is generally accepted that translations today has moved away from a marked concern in the past with the form of the message to a concern with the effect of the translation on the reader (Winckler and Van der Merwe 1993:41). This also implies an acknowledgement that translation is the result of a process of interpretation. There has also recently been a return to a version of a formal equivalence theory that seems to incorporate certain weaknesses of a formal and literal concordant approach to translation (Hope 1997). One immediately has to concede that in an idiomatic approach problems may arise to determine the criteria which might enable one to decide which implications should be explicated in a translation (Gutt 1991: 86ff).

This translation project will be based on an approach broadly taking its point of departure in a functional equivalent approach (De Waard and Nida 1987). What the original text communicated has to be conveyed as accurately as possible in the ABD within the linguistic constraints of the language used by the Afrikaans deaf. This implies adherence to the fact that Bible translators must try to make the right assumptions about the audience's cognitive environment and about the relevance of the proposed translation (Winckler and Van der Merwe 1993:51). To facilitate this process, the panel of translators not only consists of Old and New Testament scholars, but also of an able deaf reader (qualified in General Linguistics), a person who has been teaching deaf pupils for decades, as well as a minister in a deaf congregation who has served there also for many years. It therefore seems that the challenge of a "direct translation" as the ideal set by Gutt (1991:165), where the onus of making the socio-cultural shift is taken away from the translation and is left completely to the receptor language audience, seems hardly attainable in the case of the

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1. The panel which started with the work was: Prof JP Oberholzer (chair), prof HJB Combrink, Dr RP Hough (minister in the De la Bat congregation for the deaf), Ms E Roux, Mr E Kleinschmidt, Ms CJ Scheffler. The panel will be broadened to include more OT and NT scholars, as well as more deaf readers.

deaf audience. Without adequate aid in the translation itself, even total misunderstanding may occur.

This implies the following (cf Hough 1999): The source text should be translated in a manner suited to the reading abilities of the audience, that is the written language of the Afrikaans deaf. This language has its own conventions due to the linguistic abilities and constraints of the deaf.

This implies certain formal features. *Sentences* should not be too long. In a special translation project for the mentally handicapped in Indonesia, it became clear that sentences have to be kept as short as possible with an average of seven words per sentence (Katoppo 1985). Although one should avoid any implication of the deaf as being mentally handicapped, due to their specific circumstances they are linguistically severely handicapped. This may imply an interesting outcome for the ABD as it may also be effective with other groups of people whose reading abilities may be handicapped due to different reasons.

Preference is usually given to shorter and better-known *words*. But very often the translators are taken by surprise when a word that may seem to be short and simple turns out to be unknown in the deaf language, or difficult for the deaf to comprehend. On the other hand a word is sometimes quite acceptable and clear to the deaf though one would have expected it to be too long or difficult to comprehend. It seems that the vocabulary also differ according to geographic region and the fact that the deaf feel that they have a specific identity and often tend to remain in a specific social circle.

Anything in the source text that may *give rise to misconceptions* among the receptor audience, has to be avoided. One has to take into consideration the inevitable linguistic constraints of the deaf audience. Yet the result should not give the impression of bad and clumsy Afrikaans if in any way possible – that is the explicit wish of the receptor audience themselves.

Characteristic of Afrikaans deaf language is that the use of the *passive construction* has to be avoided, as this usually is very difficult to comprehend. Sentences have to be reformulated with this in mind, and this often entails supplying an explicit subject that in the text is not specifically mentioned but only implied.

Another interesting phenomenon is the fact that *anything problematic in the beginning of a sentence* seems to impede the successful and effective communication of the rest of the sentence, even though the individual words in the rest of the sentence may not be unknown or problematic. For this reason it was initially suggested to treat questions very carefully and to give a typographic indication like an inverted *question-mark* at the beginning of the sentence to show that the following sentence is to be understood as a question. This has not been taken up so far. On the other hand, if a relatively unknown word is used later on in a sentence in the linguistic context of other well-known words, it does not seem to distract the attention in the same manner as in the beginning of a sentence. *Rhetorical questions* pose a real problem and have to be reformulated; as such questions usually cannot be understood.

*The need for explanation and clarity* can be illustrated in another manner. When it is stated in Mk 12:19 that “Moses wrote for us...” followed by quotation from the Old Testament, the action of writing must be interpreted as including the content of the written communication: “Moses wrote and said ...”. This trend to make the translation more explicit by adding elements of interpretation even in cases where it normally would not seem to be necessary is a common feature in the ABD in order to minimize the chances of

misinterpretation that would otherwise be extremely high. In this case attention could only be focused on the action of writing, giving rise to some ambiguity.

The *form and style* of a text is of great importance with a view to the effectiveness of a text as a piece of communication. The basic approach would be to retain the form and style of the source even though the deaf reader usually does not infer meaning from the form and style of a text. As verbal communication is determined by the ability to draw inferences, the reader must be able to make the correct inferences from the textual stimuli, or else a misrepresentation of the communication may occur in the case of the receptor (cf. Gutt 1991:23). When the correct assumption (cf. Winckler and Van der Merwe 1993:50) is made that the form and style of the text could be enhancing the risk of misinterpreting the text, the form or style should be adapted to facilitate the optimal relevance (cf. Winckler and Van der Merwe 1993:47) of the communication to the deaf reader.

Having stated this, one should not underestimate the role of other *visual dimensions* of the printed text with a view to effective communication. Recently research has highlighted new challenges for Bible translation by calling attention to graphic design and typography (Wendland and Louw 1993). When these paralinguistic features of a text are taken into consideration, it is clear that the interesting research of Yolande Kruger (1999) on the implications of typography in Bible translations for children definitely has relevance for the ABD project too. So far, I think not nearly enough attention has been given in the ABD to the implications of the different typographical tools like paragraphs, indentation, spacing, font and letter-size, emphasis and perhaps even the role of colour.

One could also emphasize the value of *mental pictures* especially in a translation for the deaf. Whereas this approach has great merit in an “ordinary” translation (Arichea 1980:423ff), it is evident that this may be extremely useful in the case of the deaf. Arichea mentions that “the less sophisticated the intended readers are, the more complete and clear the pictures should be in the translation” (1980:429). Consequently as much information should be given as is necessary to guarantee that the reader will understand the message, or at least, should not misunderstand the message. It must in the end be the same message that the author intended to convey. A story should be analysed in terms of pictures and then be put in words again, while keeping an eye open for missing and unclear pictures, or even pictures which are out of place (Katoppo 1985:446). In this approach following the order of the events usually makes the translation easier to understand, while blurred and unclear pictures should be clarified. In the ABD some of these perspectives have been implemented so far, sometimes resulting in grouping verses together in such a manner that the traditional numbering of verses cannot be followed. It is important that numbering of verses should not be a hindrance to the meaningful restructuring of the text. Seeing that visual information as such forms an important part of the deaf language, it is, therefore, fitting to use language based on visual description as much as possible.

Mention has already been made above to the fact that verbal communication is dependent on the ability to draw inferences from verbal stimuli. Care has to be taken to ensure that *what is implicit in the text* and can be assumed to be inferred by non-deaf readers, will also be inferred by deaf readers. This implies the necessity to state clearly what may have been only inferred.

Another problem is the occurrence of *ambiguities* in the text. When ambiguity is the result of our lack of contextual knowledge, it is imperative to try and resolve the issue and give a translation with the optimal relevance. In the case of *intentional ambiguities* in the text, the challenge is to communicate that the intention of the source text was to

communicate more than one way of understanding the communication. This may even necessitate providing two possible translations in order to remain true to the source text.

*Metaphors* and *figures of speech* also pose a big challenge, as the metaphor is usually unknown in the concrete language of the deaf reader<sup>2</sup>. This is similar to the experience of the Indonesian translation referred to above (Katoppo 1985:445). It is, therefore, not adequate to make a metaphor only partially explicit – the full meaning conveyed by the metaphor has to be stated clearly. What has been done so far, is to retain the metaphor as well as to give the explicit rendering of it in an effort to retain the form of the source text. *Idioms* pose a similar problem. The original idiom can only be retained when it is clearly well known in the deaf language and not giving rise to any misconceptions (cf. Combrinck 1996a).

When the translator encounters *poetic* sections of the Bible, the translation for the deaf encounters another problem area. The deaf normally experience great difficulty in comprehending any poetry and usually try to attribute familiar meanings to words that seem to be familiar to them. It is clear that a complete misreading of the text can occur in this manner. Form and structure is inherent to poetry, and we have already seen that it is difficult to retain these elements in a translation for the deaf that would communicate with optimal relevance to its readers. This means that compact poetry inevitably has to be unpacked a bit in order to ensure communication that is as effective as possible.

The socio-cultural and religious background of the source text poses problems of another kind. This is a problem not peculiar to translating for the deaf, though it is heightened here. Since it is fallacious to transpose terms like *Sabbath* to *Sunday*, or *synagogue* with *church*, the only solution is to mark these word in the text with an asterisk and to give in a footnote on the same page (and a glossary at the back of the translation) a brief explanation – also in Afrikaans deaf language! – of the words or concepts concerned. As far as ancient terminology for weights and measures are concerned, the meaning is given in contemporary terms known in deaf language in order to facilitate the communication of the text. The strangeness of the ancient text originating from a foreign ancient near east context cannot be evened away, not for the deaf too. This has meant that so far quite a number of terms have been marked with an *asterisk*, and the *glossary* is continually growing and being revised. The translators are aware of the danger that readers often ignore footnotes, but that is as far as one can go.

This is of course an approach that is open to questioning. The use of a *footnote* actually implies that making the linguistic or contextual meaning more explicit in the text itself is to be seen as a threat to the intended meaning of the text – the information is therefore rather relegated to the footnote.

“If, for example, a literal rendering leads an audience to arrive at an immediate, but wrong, understanding of the author-intended meaning, which frequently happens even to practised Bible readers, then a footnote on its own will probably not help that much” (Wendland 1996:133).

So this issue remains a difficult case!

The panel of translators are continually gaining experience and encountering new problems. So far a continual process of revision is taking place insofar as comments received are taken seriously and the translations made so far, revised in the light of the comments.

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2. For similar problems – cf. the problems mentioned in the translating of Matthew in some African languages (Combrinck 1996a).

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