

HOW DO YOU REPORT SOMETHING THAT WAS SAID WITH A SMILE? – CAN WE OVERCOME THE LOSS OF MEANING WHEN ORAL-MANUSCRIPT TEXTS OF THE BIBLE ARE REPRESENTED IN MODERN PRINTED MEDIA?

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Abstract

The paper examines the loss of meaning that occurs when Biblical manuscripts are translated into the modern printed media. Most of the Biblical texts originated in cultures where the conventions of oral and manuscript communication predominated. When such texts are translated into modern languages a loss of meaning is bound to occur. Because of a literate bias such shifts in meaning normally go unnoticed. Translators therefore have to develop conscious strategies to counteract this loss of meaning. Some of these strategies are: (1) drawing a clear profile of the media cultures available to the Biblical authors; (2) assessing the interplay between different media interfaces as they appear in the text; and (3) understanding the constraints that the properties of the specific media exert on the process of communication.

In modern Bible translations ancient handwritten texts, which for the most part rest on an oral pre-history, are rendered in printed form. This common observation has profound significance for Bible translation. When texts are translated from one language to another, some loss of meaning is bound to occur. However, the loss of meaning is even greater when a text encoded in one medium is translated into a text encoded in another medium. Presently the phenomenon of medium – whether oral, manuscript or print – deserves renewed attention. Plato already bemoaned the loss of meaning when oral texts are replaced by manuscripts, but modern readers usually naïvely assume that media are neutral and do not contribute anything to the content of what is translated. They assume that changes during the process of translation are the result of differences in linguistic and social codes.¹ However, in the process of translation, one has to note linguistic as well as meta- and para-linguistic aspects, and the fact that meaning is expressed not only on a lexical level, but also on the level of the phrase, paragraph and genre. I shall argue that the media of communication significantly influence aspects of meaning on various levels.

When considering Bible translation due attention has to be given to its oral dimension. A new interest in the oral medium is dramatically illustrated by a remarkable academic confession found in J Neusner's foreword to the new edition of B Gerhardson's *Memory and Manuscript* (1998) in which issues of orality and literacy were explored in biblical manuscripts. When the latter work first appeared in 1961 Neusner gave it a negative

1. An example of this assumption is found in Cecil Hargreaves's otherwise zesty work on *A translator's freedom* (1993:124-126) where he writes about the need for non-coded language in English Bible translations. However, the tacit assumption of his argument is that translating is mainly a question of targeting the audience with the right vocabulary and idiom.

review. Now he admits that he had been grossly mistaken. Without entering into the detail, we can note that he now recognises the validity of a “paradigmatic” approach, and accepts that general cultural paradigms (in this case, sets of conventions regulating oral and manuscript texts) are necessary for the understanding of literary activity in the second temple period (1998:xxxii).

R Alter gives another pointer to the importance of the oral qualities of the Biblical text in his study *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (2000) in which he examines the reception of the Hebrew Bible in modern literature (with reference to Franz Kafka, the Hebrew-Russian poet Haim Nahman Bailik and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*). He shows how, in spite of the modernist rejection of much of the Biblical content, the force of the Biblical canon lives on in their works. Through all ages of the Hebrew canon writers composed literary reflections reminiscent of that canon. This is clear evidence of the “oral” power of the ground text, which somehow remains un-translatable.

In spite of such pointers, there still is a widespread misunderstanding of the properties and practices of the oral and manuscript media of the first century and how they affect the meaning of texts. A telling example of such misunderstanding is the speculation of R. Mayer on the two reasons why there is such an “apparent carelessness” in the literature of early Judaism when quoting Scripture. “On the one hand,” he says, “there was a great range of variations in the textual tradition. On the other, there was liberty to change the form of a text to accord with the theological basis and aims of the individual community, a liberty for which every community claimed an equal right to the Holy Spirit” (1971:488). A much more simple reason is that the quotations were done from memory, an option that he does not consider.

Ventures into Sociolinguistics

The question of how to translate paralinguistic and extralinguistic aspects has increasingly vexed translators as they became more sophisticated in their methodology. Some methodological investigation was sponsored by the United Bible Societies and became a special focus of a significant contribution to the field of Bible translation. Having produced together with Charles R Taber the significant volume on *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969) that supplied the basis for a series of dynamic equivalent translations in modern languages, Eugene A Nida embarked on a series of joint studies with a small group of South African scholars. A symposium held in 1984 on Bible translation and sociolinguistics at Stellenbosch, South Africa, laid the foundation for several publications on the issue (Louw 1985, 1986 and Wendland 1985). A further development was the *Greek-English Lexicon* of the NT (1988) by South African scholar JP Louw together with Nida.

The work of Nida and associates had a profound effect on the theory of translation and produced some lucid and highly legible translations, supposedly based on sound linguistic principles (e.g., the Good News Bible, cf. Hargreaves 1993:54). The venture into sociolinguistics was obviously an attempt to investigate ways in which to accommodate issues relating to the social context that were in danger of being neglected by dynamic equivalent translations. VN Webb, one of the 1984 group, explains: “structuralist (or text-immanent) theories of Biblical exegesis are in themselves insufficient aids to understanding the Bible” (in Louw 1986:79). He adds, “...far more knowledge is conveyed during a speech event than just information about the matters referred to” (in Louw 1986:80).

The directions in which Webb and the other members of the 1984 symposium were looking for such surplus meaning are the social aspect of the linguistic forms and varieties used in the Bible. These “may have been socially embedded and will thus be socially

meaningful. These meanings are then naturally conveyed in the original texts along with the referential meaning” (in Louw 1986:77). References to socio-cultural aspects made in the original language have to be identified and interpreted. By speaking of meanings “naturally conveyed in the original texts” he is actually referring to oral conventions, but does not follow this up. The question has to be mooted whether this type of approach produced any results. In other words, did it adequately explore those aspects of the text that did not feature in the linguistic codes and therefore eluded the translators? I shall argue that their work, important though it was, calls for complimentary inputs to illuminate the oral and manuscript culture of Biblical times.

For Nida sociolinguistics (“language in action in social context”) is the subdiscipline that can assist in translating meanings that are not evident from the linguistic aspect of the text (in Louw 1986:48). One would have wished him to go further and say that paralinguistic aspects have to do with the *medium* of the text, but by his omission we must assume that he did not regard the oral performance of the letters or gospels as important for translation purposes.²

Nida is impressed by the great variety of sociolects as they manifest in the lexicon and in the grammar. “Not only is no language homogeneous, but neither is any society homogeneous” (in Louw 1986:8). He relates the diversity in language to “the diversity of groups, including location, occupation, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and ideology...” (in Louw 1986:9). The two main dimensions in terms of which interpersonal relations are structured are *power* and *solidarity*. Emblems, badges, titles, the size of one’s office, and type of clothing can overtly mark the former especially by differences in language (in Louw 1986:9). On each level of authority there is a considerable degree of solidarity among equals. Such groups can be marked by passwords, special rituals, emblems, types of hairdo and language and an almost infinite variety of identity markers (in Louw 1986:10).

One further has to reckon with variation of language usage by one individual, Nida contends. Most normal speakers control more than one form or type of the language. There are five levels of individual language usage: ritual, formal, informal, casual and intimate (Nida in Louw 1986:12). Whereas one dialect may be important to regulate power, another may be important for reasons of solidarity (in Louw 1986:13). Nida also spends some time in exploring ways in which social codes can be inscribed in texts. He points out that any aspect of language may have social significance. “The most obvious features in rhetoric involve levels of formality, all the way from ritual to intimate expressions” (in Louw 1986:19). Knowing more about the status and background of Theophilus in the introduction to the Gospel of Luke would have been significant in understanding the social reality to which the Gospel refers (in Louw 1986:21).

Nida does not spell out the relevance of this for the Bible translator. One wishes to inquire, “How does a modern interpreter determine which kind of sociolinguistic usage is found in the Biblical text, and how can the operation of the dimensions of power and solidarity be identified?” Some of these social aspects would be inscribed in the linguistic code of the text, but it is obvious that most of these would resort under paralinguistic

2. Paralinguistic features have the same function as language, but operate in another semiotic system, e.g., gestures can be such another semiotic system, and also visual images. Paralinguistic communications sometimes function instead of language and sometimes with language, depending on the communicator’s choice of primary medium. In a linguistic text it is not so much an issue that some features cannot be inscribed as that they are not deemed necessary to be inscribed. The most common reason for not inscribing paralinguistic meanings into a linguistic text is that cultural communication practices render them unnecessary because these are commonly accepted.

phenomena. Such aspects would have been evident during live performances of the text in Biblical times. To this we shall return later.

Nida also describes at length how different “speech events” can be significant to understanding the social reality involved in the communication. For this he introduces the example of preaching, but does not apply this to the oral performance of Biblical texts. He mentions: “in the case of preaching, something about the place, circumstances, and theological orientation of both the speaker and audience are important. For the actual performance, careful attention must be given to gestures, stance, eye contact, and degree of dramatization. The paralinguistic features of quality of voice, intonation, and rhythm are also crucial. On the lexical level it is important to note those set phrases which may carry a good deal of associative meaning but which may not have much designative meaning...” (Louw 1986:23). He further notes that different genres may reflect different social realities. “For example, solidarity is often communicated through figurative language, proverbs, parables, and question-and-answer devices in which the opportunity for feedback almost inevitably creates a greater sense of participation and oneness” (in Louw 1986:25).

These very features are those that would have been present during live performances of Biblical texts, but are now, for the most part, inaccessible to modern readers. A consideration of the oral environment of the Biblical texts would have been relevant for sociolinguistic considerations. This becomes evident from Nida’s discussion in some detail of the narrative of Joseph in Genesis 37-47. He shows how the story is told with the motifs of dreams all coming in pairs and with parallel or identical meanings. Other elements he points to are the constant repetition of the fact that all is part of the plan and purpose of God, the constant heightening of tension, and the reversal of roles, and good deeds so often followed by serious complications”. He then comments: “unfortunately, much of the structure of the story is disguised in many translations by the paragraphing”. Nida consequently suggests a typographical solution. The story should be “printed in such a way as to more meaningfully indicate the dramatic elements in the episode” (in Louw 1986:36).

Still under the heading of sociolinguistics and Bible translation Nida then illustrates the phenomenon of “isomorphism” at the hand of a series of biblical passages. Under the latter he understands the way in which the narratives point to the social reality outside the text.³ He points to figures of style (repetitions and chiasms) and typical narrative devices.⁴ After presenting his own analysis of narrative sequence he concludes:

A translator is not in a position to alter the contents of the Gospel of Matthew. But there are certain things which can be done to highlight certain aspects of the three dominant themes, namely, opposition, validation, and decline in the number of followers, all of which is resolved in the dramatic events of the risen Christ. Something of these significant themes and the structure of the Gospel can be included in a brief introduction. Furthermore, the paragraphing of the text can be so arranged as to highlight the crucial divisions, and important junctures can be marked by extra spacing. Special attention should also be given to the section headings so that the dramatic character of the Matthean account can be appreciated (in Louw 1986:45-46).

From the above it is clear that under the heading of sociolinguistics, Nida is grappling with a variety of aspects that are related to the live oral performances of the Biblical manuscripts. In ancient times such “sociolinguistic” features were evident in the immediate

3. He omits to note the fact that the reality referred to by the text is still a social reality as constructed by the author.

4. He politely criticises Bernard Combrink’s structural analysis of Matthew (*Scriptura* 1982, Special issue) for not explaining it in terms of narrative sequence (in Louw 1986:40).

life situation, but since they are not clearly inscribed in the text, they present a most difficult challenge to the modern translator. Nida remarks that modern translators indicate social context by means of footnotes and prefaces (in Louw 1986:21), while in some cases the printed text has to be manipulated through highlighting, spacing and the insertion of headings.

JP Louw's contribution in the same volume to the issue of Bible translation and sociolinguistics include reports of experiments of how listeners to tape-recorded sermons came to different understandings of the same message, depending on how they interpreted the emphases of the speaker. Louw explains that during oral-aural communication such emphases are apparent, but "...in written communication, a good deal is accomplished by underlining, the use of bold type, italics, extra spacing, and indentation" (Louw 1986:120, 123). Such features are not available to oral speech. The three experiments that he reported showed how common features of oral presentation enable understanding: highlighting, foregrounding, and emphasis on a central theme (Louw 1986:125). He remarks: "it is still an open question whether the divisions (paragraphs and section headings in a translation) are really as effective as they should be in helping people to understand the message of a particular Bible book".

Though interesting to someone researching the features of oral performance, Louw's investigation does not serve to clarify the issue for he makes the dubious assumption that present day oral performances more or less show the same social and stylistic features as orality in the time of the Bible. On the contrary, it has been shown that the functions of orality itself vary depending on the total environment of media present (Ong 1982:115). Between first century orality and orality in the present, there is a significant difference. Nevertheless, it remains a daunting question that Louw by implication tries to solve: How does one translate an oral speech and represent it in writing in such a way that the original emphases of the speaker are made known. If it proves to be so difficult to interpret recordings of modern sermons, how much more difficult must it be to translate first century speeches of which only characters in ink, written on parchment and papyrus remain.

Of all the participants of the 1984 symposium, E Wendland comes the closest to asking how a translator should compensate for the loss of meaning when translating oral texts into modern media. He starts off from the idea that Bible translation is itself a communicative event that seeks to translate a recorded communication event (Wendland 1985:36). He works with a comprehensive definition of what the shift from speech to writing entails:

Generally one would expect that the shift from speech to writing involved alterations to the linguistic form such as these: a written style is more regularized grammatically, with fewer 'performance errors'; it is at the same time less redundant, having an aversion for repetition, especially exact reiteration; it is more complex syntactically, exhibiting longer sentences and embeddings which are intended to present ideas in a more 'logical' array; its clause, sentence, paragraph, etc. transitions are more explicitly marked; it avoids certain typically colloquial forms and localisms, aiming for a more formal, dignified and widely understood manner of expression; it introduces additional textual attribution and description, including colorful terms, figurative language and special sound effects (alliteration, assonance, rhythm, etc) - depending upon the genre - in order to provide extra verbal animation to compensate for the absence of sound (intonation, voice quality, etc.), non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, etc.) and personal participation (including 'feedback') by receptors in the communication event (Wendland 1985:76).

Wendland does not enter into detail to show how this striking description applies to Bible translation. His focus on paralinguistic features (quality of voice, loudness, pitch) and

extralinguistic features (eye contact, stance, relative distance of source and receptors) alerts him especially to those aspects that are obvious during live speech, but which are difficult to inscribe in a text (Wendland and Nida in Louw 1985: 4-5). He is impressed by the strong oral features that can be observed in the Old Testament and mentions: “one might observe the following which are concentrated in the speeches of the Biblical participants: repetition, vocatives, exclamations, intensifiers, dramatic infinitives, ellipsis, verbless predication, asyndeton (minus conjunctives), the emphatic use of the personal pronoun, word order variations, and subtle sound effects, among others” (1985:78). Wendland further asks whether the obviously stylised sections of the Old Testament, e.g., the poetic passages in the prophets, were creations of the scribes, or whether they reflect an original oral, formulaic and rhetorical mode of presentation (1985:76-77). He concludes: “This is not to say that we are dealing with naturalistic transcriptions of complete speeches. There must have been some amount of literary representation – of altering an oral mode of communication to writing, including the selection of what is actually ‘said’, in order to give the ‘illusion’ of speech. But the end result appears to be closer to the original oral substratum than is generally assumed.”

Besides these informative remarks it is not clear where Wendland is heading. Having established that the Old Testament exhibits strong “oral” features, what does he aim to do with this knowledge? Does he wish to recover the “original” performance? This would seem to be impossible from the outset. For his observations to be fruitful distinctions are required between (a) traces of oral performance in the written text and (b) the live, oral performance of the text according to the general practice in Biblical times. For all practical purposes he tacitly assumes that media usage then and now remained more or less stable.

Determining what writing doesn’t represent

Reception theory

Another development, which contributors to the seminar on Bible translation and sociolinguistics considered was that of reception and reader response theories. B Lategan points to reception theory as a method to explore the phenomenon that texts convey more than mere propositional meaning. He explains: “The text has, according to Iser, a ‘structure of appeal’ (*Appelstruktur*). It has a certain reading it offers to its reader and contains certain instructions for the reader” (Lategan in Louw 1986:91). It is noteworthy that Lategan in 1984, with sophisticated deliberations about reader response criticism and reception theories, did not observe much difference between readers and audiences. Though he has sought to widen the concept of “reader” to include “oral” readers (or “ordinary readers” as described by G West, 1995, who quotes him) such a generalised definition does not satisfy. This assumption presupposes *individual* recipients and neglects the aspects of reciting and performing within a *communal* context. In the case of the Bible, any *Appelstruktur* (in Iser’s words) has to be understood within the context of live performances as they occurred within the oral-manuscript culture of the first century.

Other theories

A variety of other theories deal with meanings not reflected by the propositional statements in the text. At the beginning of the 20th century M Jousse (1990, 1997) made the strong point that the gospels were mnemo-catechetical texts, i.e., texts produced and taught to disciples for the purpose of memorising and recitation. To do justice to this aspect, he tried to retrieve an “original” Aramaic text of the gospels and maintained that the freshness of oral practices were much better preserved in this text than in the Greek texts that have

modified the pure orality of the gospel materials. This he illustrated with a remarkable Aramaic reconstruction of the “Our Father” prayer, exposing the original rhythm (cf. review by Loubser 1999).⁵

Interpretive theories making use of semiotic theory (e.g., V Robbins’s socio-rhetorical analysis, 1996, and B Malina, 1996, and others’ social-scientific studies) have made valuable advances in understanding extra and paralinguistic semiotic systems presupposed in the Biblical text.

Illocutionary Force

Though all the approaches discussed so far deal with those aspects of texts that are not expressed in propositional terms, none of them deal specifically with properties of the oral and manuscript media. Even the disciplines of sociolinguistics and reception theory, though valuable to translators for various reasons, do not clarify the issue of media. More useful insights come from speech act theory. For this we can refer to a significant chapter in a book by David Olson on “What writing doesn’t represent” (chapter 5, 1994:91-114). Olson’s overall interest is in the psycholinguistics of writing. In this chapter, however, he explores the shift between speech and writing, but then also the different manners in which forms of writing compensate for the loss of meaning when natural speech is recorded in writing. In other words, he describes the loss of meaning when information is conveyed from the oral medium to the manuscript or printed media.⁶

Illocution, he explains, has to do with the *intent* of an utterance, which can be meant as a statement, question, command or promise. Searle (1969) distinguished five different types of illocutionary force: assertives (“I state...”), commissives (“I promise...”), directives (“I command...”), declaratives (“I christen...”) and expressives (“I congratulate...”) (Olson 1994:120). When ancient scribes recorded speech, no provision was made to represent the illocutionary force of the utterance, i.e., there is no lexicalisation of illocutionary force. During live oral speech, such illocutionary function was obvious and there was no need for it to be explicitly inscribed in the linguistic codes of the text. When reading a scribal recording of an oral text (as much of the Biblical materials are) there is little in the text to tell one whether the information is given as a statement, promise, command, a declaration or expression of feeling, etc. (1994:92). Expressions such as “You’re a real friend,” can be meant sincerely or ironically (1994:91). “We say ‘I’ll get it’ rather than ‘I promise that I’ll get it,’ we say ‘Sit down’ rather than ‘I order you to sit down’ and we say ‘Hydrogen is a chemical element’ rather than ‘I assert that hydrogen is a chemical element’ and so on” (Olson 1994:92-93). Olson asks, “How do you report that something was said with a smile?” (1994:97).

With reference to Olson one can imagine what a difference some information on the illocutionary force would make to the interpretation of key Biblical passages. Did Jesus, e.g., command the rich young man to sell his possessions or was it a suggestion? Did the

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5. Dr. Dietmar Winkler (see 1997), a specialist on the Oriental Orthodox tradition, personally explained to me that he experienced similar mnemo-technical procedures in the Syrian Orthodox Church in Kerala, India. To some extent I also found these procedures in the Coptic Orthodox and the Ethiopian Orthodox traditions, where both, like the Syrian Church, use Semitic languages that resemble the Aramaic spoken in Jesus’ time much more than Koine Greek did. On authority of Papias one can assume that the Aramaic oral tradition was translated into a Koine oral tradition.
 6. Olson credits McLuhan for relating the shift in culture to a shift in media usage, but criticises him: “Just exactly how these changes in media produced their effects was less clear; he appealed ... to notions of altered sense of ratios, an idea McLuhan took from William Blake. But McLuhan was a literary critic and while his theme was irresistible, his theories were not” (Olson 1994:54).

apostle Paul speak of the false apostles in a sarcastic, ironical or humorous tone? When Jesus confronted the Pharisees, did he do it in a loud or soft tone; was he harshly condemning them or moved by sorrow? How much more would we have understood if we have access to the pitch, tempo and rhythm of the first performances, if we had access to the background noises, smells and gestures accompanying the oral performances? We would have been able to grasp irony, sarcasm, satire and humor where today we stare ourselves blind against lifeless propositional statements that often do not seem to fit in the context.

It seems that Plato's famous statement about the written word as an orphan was dead on target when the absence of indications of illocutionary force in Biblical texts is taken into consideration. To the modern reader the Biblical texts are orphans, for they have no one to speak for them. This uncertainty of interpretation has great consequences for literacy in general. Olson comments,

The history of literacy ... is the struggle to recover that which was lost in simple transcription. ... Writing ... loses the voice-qualities of the speaker including stress and intonation, the 'silent language' revealed in bodily clues manifest in eyes, hands, and stance as well as the cognitively shared context, all of which in oral contexts indicate how the utterance is to be taken. The problem of writing then becomes that of inventing devices, including lexical and syntactical ones, which can compensate for what is lost. And the problem in reading is in mastering those clues and the hermeneutical techniques which provide some indication of how the writer intended the text to be taken (1994:111).

Olson proceeds to describe the literary techniques that were developed to overcome this marked deficiency. This development only came over time and in classical Greece was signified by the development of prose writing after the fifth century BCE. One of the techniques to signify illocutionary force is the development of "metalinguistic terms" for speech act verbs (such as say, speak, tell) to distinguish direct speech from reported speech. Olson explains the relationship between speech acts and illocutionary force, by stating that "A speech act is to express some propositional content with some illocutionary force" (1994:120). Speech act terms are, e.g., "ask", "insist", "claim" and "deny" (Olson 1994:97). Other "metalinguistic terms" that are introduced are the so-called "mental state terms", such as "deny", "imply", "concede", "allege" (1994:101). Some adverbs introduced to express this function are, "eagerly", "hesitatingly", "sternly", "forthrightly", "meekly", "forcefully", "repeatedly" and "directly" (1994:102).

A significant finding is that in the English language used before the year 1150 about two thirds of the speech act and mental state verbs used today were still unknown.⁷ Among those that were known were: "believe", "know", "mean", "say", "tell", "think", "understand". Unknown were: "assert", "assume", "claim", "concede", "conclude", "confirm", "contradict", "criticize", "declare", "define", "deny", "discover", "doubt", "explain", "hypothesize", "imply", "infer", "interpret", "observe", "predict", "prove", "remember" and "suggest" (1994:109).⁸ The use of speech act and mental state verbs even today are not as widespread as a literate person would believe. In a study together with Astington (1990) Olson found that only students who are in the more academic streams had a working knowledge of such concepts as "concede", "imply", "infer", "hypothesize", "interpret," etc. (1994:254).

7. Speech act verbs are those that can take the place of "say", while mental state verbs can take the place of the word "think".

8. From personal experience teaching students from a background with strong oral leanings, these are words that they find difficult to use correctly in a second language.

For understanding and translating Biblical texts that have been produced in an oral-manuscript culture still more can be learnt from Olson. Two more mechanisms that serve to indicate illocutionary force are (a) direct and indirect speech and (b) genre:

In oral context the speaker “tends to rely on direct quotation of the words of the speaker, to some degree of accuracy, using his own tone of voice to convey the speech act involved” (1994:107). In contrast, in prose “...a ... burden falls on the writer to characterize [an] attitude through exclusively lexical means” (1994:108). Ohlson declares: “When texts begin to provide verbal indications of how any expression is to be taken, we have the beginnings of modern prose” (1994:112). Many non-literate cultures employ evidential markers such as “it is the custom”, or “I saw with my own eyes”, or “it is said”, some of which appear to have the effect of putting the statement in quotes (Olson with reference to Chafe and Sperber).

Recognizing rhetorical form or genre is another way of indicating illocutionary force when it is not lexically specified (Olson 1994:140). “When the author’s attitude to what is said is maintained over longer stretches of discourse than a single sentence, the resulting form of text is referred to as a rhetorical form or ‘genre’” (1994:121). On a more restricted level, illocutionary force is also expressed or implied in smaller linguistic units. Olson refers to Chafe (1985,1991) who proposed the “idea unit” as basic unit of speech. He explains: “... it consists of a clause which is composed of a verb and one or more noun phrases, it has a single intonational contour, it is composed of about seven words and it lasts about two seconds; it seems to correspond to the amount of information a speaker can focus on in consciousness at a point of time” (1994:117). This seems to be a most important observation with far reaching consequences for Bible translators.

At this point Ohlson proposes a groundbreaking idea. “My guess is that illocutionary force is the most primitive part of language, the part of language shared with other animals and readily detected by infants” (1994:113). To illustrate this, he refers to studies of understanding by pre-literates. In the case of pre-literate children it was found that “... although they can repeat an utterance verbatim ... only when they are six years of age or older are they capable of distinguishing systematically between a verbatim repetition and a paraphrase” (Olson 1994:127). It seems that in a primary oral mode the human mind does not focus on verbal accuracy. In the case of Bible interpretation and translation, this means that reported speech needs to be dealt with in a different light from modern quotations, which are expected to be verbally accurate. Another relevant finding was that rhetorical conventions such as irony, sarcasm, understatement and hyperbole are taken by young children to be all literally false (unlike ambiguity where not all information is provided). These are taken by children to be either true, lies or mistakes until they are eight or nine years of age (Olson, 1994:132, with reference to Winner 1988, Winner et alia 1987). This is even the case among some adults in oral societies. Heeschen found that among the Eipo figures of speech such as irony and overstatement were not distinguished from lies (1978 cited in Ohlson 1994:139).

In oral traditions speech acts are expressed in forms different from those in written form. Structural cohesion is marked by intonation. The same can be said of the indication of main points, subordinate points, asides, digressions, which all are expressed by non-lexical clues. This is a clear sign how the oral medium of communication imposes different limitations on the style and even contents of data transmitted. Scripts, on the other hand, do not capture stress, intonation ... statement, command, or give clues whether they are to be taken literal or metaphorical. Features such as suggestion versus command, conjecture versus assertion are not overtly marked (cf. Olson 1994:252-253).

Because the Biblical texts have been conceived predominantly in the oral medium, at a stage when and in a society where prose writing was still in its infancy and restricted to the literary elite, it is of the greatest importance to investigate methods of understanding and translating the illocutionary force of the texts.

Different modes of expression and interpretation in oral cultures can provide some clues as to how Biblical materials functioned in the early stages of canonisation. Olson mentions Feldman and McKellin who provided examples of the differing modes of interpretation present in traditional oral societies (1994:137-139). Oral “texts” can include oblique reference, ambiguity and hedges of various sorts. They can use symbolic tokens, allegories, and dream interpretation to avoid discussions or open displays of intention. “Aspects of oral discourse that were carried by stance, voice and tone are now either ignored or reconstructed, often laboriously, from other clues within the text, or explicated through a new set of concepts and a new genre of discourse” (Olson 1994:142-142).

Sometimes people in traditional oral societies also have to cope with the “poverty” of primary oral texts. They have therefore developed practices of compensating for this in cases where uncertainty about reported messages exist:

As long as texts, like speech, are seen as carrying multiple levels of meaning – of hinting, alluding, insinuating, allegorizing as well as stating, with significant aspects of meaning to be indicated by context and intonation – it is impossible to say exactly or definitively what a sentence or text means. Further, as long as texts serve primarily as transcriptions of the lexical and syntactic properties of speech they could at best assist one in remembering what was said but could not fully represent how it was to be taken. In face-to-face contexts, the solution is relatively simple. The way to decide the intended meaning of an oral utterance is to keep talking until some understanding and agreement is reached. The actual language utilized in the process cannot be taken *as* the definitive agreement; the agreement is the mutual understanding (Olson 1994:180).

Some of the general conclusions that Olson draws at the end of his study (1994:258-271) are relevant to our purpose. He has shown that writing systems do not bring all that is said into awareness. Literary devices represent an attempt to compensate for the meaning that was lost in the act of transcription, but it might even be impossible to bring some of those elements into consciousness (1994:260-261). One of the consequences of this is that the powers of speech and literacy will remain complimentary rather than similar. Once a certain “script-as-model has been assimilated it is extremely difficult to unthink that model and see how someone not familiar with that model would perceive language” (1994:262). The result is that similar epistemological strategies are used for approaching texts and those for approaching other aspects of reality; once texts are read in a certain way, nature is “read” in an analogous way.

Challenge to Bible Translators

The above discussion serves to emphasise those aspects of speech that are not rendered in writing. These aspects fall into different categories. While some of them cannot be rendered in writing (e.g., tone), other aspects are thought not to be necessary to inscribe (e.g., the illocutionary forces). In the case of illocutionary force the point was made that literary techniques for compensating for the loss of meaning when the materials are written down were only developed over many centuries. These considerations introduce some challenging questions to Bible translators and interpreters: To what extent is the Biblical text merely a recording of primary oral texts? How much of it can be seen as literary texts? In the case of a recorded oral composition, should a translator supply the absent indicators

of meaning? How should a translator convey the meaning of the text if varying interpretations of the illocutionary force are possible?

Modes of orality in the Bible

In the Bible a wide spectrum of oral-manuscript interfaces are present. Each of these interfaces employs different techniques for transcribing texts from one medium into the other. Let us only note those “oral” aspects of the Bible that are more general and concern all the Holy Scriptures. Throughout the Bible we find what Prof. Kelber already in 1983 described as a pervasive “residual orality”. A fact that should always be kept in mind is that the activities of composition and reading included a much greater oral component than in present practices. The image of a singular author working in silence and actually composing his work on papyrus, or of a singular silent reader pondering the meaning of the text, simply does not apply to the world of the Bible.⁹ Composition was predominantly an oral and in most cases a communal event. The primary depository of composed texts was the human memory and not any external resource. Further, the recollection of the texts was first and foremost done from memory. “Reading” consisted of recollecting and performing a memorised text before an empathetic and responding audience. Even in cases where manuscripts were available reading took on the form of recollection of a memorised text from memory, with oblique reference to the manuscript as an aide to memory or simply to enhance the authority of the “reader”. Silent reading was a rare exception to the rule.¹⁰

This information has been provided by a number of eloquent studies during the past decades¹¹ and one would hope that this would receive attention from scholars involved in Bible translation, especially when investigating the importance of sociolinguistics for their discipline. However, some translators do not consider the oral features of the text to have any significant influence on the outcome of their work.

Letter-writing according to Acts 15

As an example of the extra-linguistic meanings that were presupposed in texts at the time of the NT, we can examine Acts 15, which gives a report of the ‘Jerusalem Council’s’ letter to the church in Antioch. This is also a remarkable account of how a letter was produced and delivered to the petitioning audience.

The letter was a response to a crisis reported by messengers (Paul and Barnabas).

Communal deliberations were held under the guidance of the Holy Spirit under the leadership of the apostles (from the missionary team) and the elders (from the local church). The recipients of the letter were represented by their messengers (Paul and Barnabas) and supplied the necessary feedback.

Delegates (Judas and Silas) were chosen and commissioned to commit the message to manuscript.

The same delegates were to travel with the messengers to the recipient congregation and to read-perform the message before a responsive audience. The written letter appears to have been brief and had the status of a mnemonic aid. (The message was read, explained and confirmed at length by the readers while exercising their prophetic gifts, cf. 15:32).

9. This mode of composition did not even apply in medieval times according to Carruthers (1990).

10. The only two references to silent reading in antiquity are discussed by Olson (1994:159-160). These are in, *The Knights* of Aristophanes 116-145 [424 BC] and *Iphigeneia in Aulis* of Euripides 34-38 [405 BC].

11. Kelber (1983, 1995), Niditch (1996), Thomas (1992).

Summary

SENDERS	MESSAGE	RECEIVERS
authorial community, articulating leader, writer, messenger, reader-performer	<i>media</i> : the spoken word, aided by writing in a secondary sense; <i>codes</i> : apart from phonetic-linguistic codes also emotive-gestural-rhetorical, and literary codes <i>contents</i> : generated from collectively memorised scriptural tradition as applied to specific situations	participating, responding audience, providing oral feedback through reader and messengers

Properties of the manuscript medium in the first century

We can now summarise the main features of manuscript culture during the final stages of the time in which the Bible was produced. It occurred in a cultural phase that is sometimes called “rhetorical culture” (circa 323 B.C.E. – 150 C.E.). A better term would be “Intermediate Manuscript Culture” because it represents a middle position between the primary manuscript culture of Classical Greece and the high manuscript culture of Late Antiquity. On the whole this was a period in which the oral and written media became uniquely dependent on each other.

The many different types of interface between orality and literacy involved the use of some practices and procedures, which are mostly foreign to people living in modern culture. It presupposed feedback systems and an eye-ear-mouth-hand coordination different from ours. The use of manuscript writing during this period extended beyond the needs of scribal recording for purposes of management and control in the political and economical fields. It served to preserve and reproduce religious, epic, artistic, dramatic, philosophical and historical texts, while also serving communication between individuals and communities that were separated by distance (although feedback could take months).

Writing was expensive, cumbersome and the prerogative of a small minority. Texts were not stable and scribal errors caused endless variants of authoritative texts. In comparison to the modern book, manuscripts contained a limited capacity for storing information.¹² Manuscripts were also vulnerable to decay and to confiscation and burning by censoring agencies. For the persecuted early church this would have been enough incentive to rely on the oral traditions.

In this phase speech was already being influenced by manuscript culture, e.g., rhetoricians would compose their speeches through writing and also publish them in writing. Students would take notes from famous teachers (and sometimes hand these over to booksellers). The way people spoke was influenced by the fact that recorded speech became a common feature of society. However, because of the limits of manuscripts, writing was much more dependent on oral communication than today. Manuscripts, because of their cryptic nature, called for being accompanied by sympathetic messengers and oral readers and performers. Reading strategies, much different from today where printed texts are silently read, were employed. Both composition and reading were usually done orally in a communal setting, with the composer speaking aloud. The scarcity of orthographic markers in *scripta continua* of the first century Greek manuscript caused the

12. The longest individual papyrus roll preserved in the British Museum, London, is merely 133 feet long and 16.75 inches wide (the Harris Papyrus of the 12th century BCE). In terms of present books this is relatively short.

written word to resemble the spoken word much more than printed documents today. Manuscripts were produced to be memorised and recited (=read, recollected) from memory, thus employing semiotic codes such as gesture and body language to the full. The reading speed for manuscripts was the same as that of the spoken word (in the case of silent reading it is four times faster). What was produced on papyrus or parchment was mostly a continuous stream of characters without any spaces or punctuation. Thus writing and reading strategies different from those of today were necessary. Writing served to refine and reinforce speech. A different set of stylistic features (chiasms, ring composition, foregroundings and various techniques of emphasis) was developed to manage this. Both writing and speech in this phase employed such figures of style.

Memorisation provided the link for the unique interaction between speaking and writing. As a rule pupils were required to memorise written material and then in a second phase they had to learn the correct pronunciation and performance of the script. Interpretation was left for a third phase in the learning process.¹³

Because of the proximity of speech and writing, the development of a more literary prose where the illocutionary force is reflected only appears in rare circles of high culture. Manuscript writing, one can say with certainty, is never encountered without the immediate support of the oral-aural medium, which enables the direct colouring of the message by means of pitch, tone and rhythm indicating emotion and mood.

The problem with modern Bible translations

It seems as if the problems of translating the Biblical text have not grown less, but have increased with time. Despite the high level of sophistication that Bible translation has reached and the wide variety of translations available, it is an almost pervasive problem that in translation primary oral texts are translated as if they were literary products. This tendency to transform oral-manuscript texts into literary texts can be observed with reference to the lexical and stylistic levels.

Lexical level

We find that speech act words are modified in modern translations to include hints of illocutionary force. Where the word “say”, e.g., is repeated, modern translations tend to suppress the repetition of the same word as a present day copy writer would have done when recording live speech.

We also find that Biblical words for memorising, performing and sending messages are readily translated into words that fit our modern practices for generating, recording and transmitting literary texts. Consequently communication words that we find in the English translations (e.g., “read”, “write”, “epistle”, “book”) constantly throw modern readers off the track by suppressing the associative oral practices. This problem is enhanced by translation theories that intentionally suppress associative meaning as, e.g., the *Greek-English Lexicon* by Louw and Nida (1988).

Louw criticises the famous Kittel dictionary extensively for not distinguishing between “reference” and “lexical meaning” (1985:103). The same criticism is directed at the *Theologische Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament* (Coenen et alia 1972) for not being based “on linguistic considerations but on dogmatic points of view” (Louw 1985:113). This equally applies to the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C

13. This was the division in the Rabbinic schools of the second century and later, and the same division is found today still in the schools of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as witnessed by the author in 1999.

Brown, 1975). As an improvement on these dictionaries Louw and Nida have published a remarkable dictionary based on semantic domains (1988). To counter an unwarranted collation of meanings they define words in terms of “the distinctive features of meaning” in the immediate context (Wendland & Nida in Louw, 1985:31) and group them according to universal semantic domains. This dictionary is widely used by the United Bible Societies.

A superficial review of the words used for communication in the Lexicon (Louw and Nida 1988:388) demonstrates the elaborate oral-aural culture of the NT. Only one of the 30 subdomains is dedicated to “written language”. A review also shows that a limited number of lemmas are used for a great variety of concepts used in oral-aural communication. Because of its nature the Lexicon does not focus on the social connotations of the specific words used.

It is not a case that the authors are not aware of the associative meanings of words (or meanings on the paradigmatic axis, according to structuralist theory). In an article they demonstrate with great clarity the associative meaning of words. In an interesting exercise they compare the associative meanings of the words “mother” and “woman” in six categories (good-bad, attractive-ugly, strong-weak, etc., on a sliding scale from one to ten) (1985:18-19). Louw also mentions in an article that it is “imperative to recognise that meaning is conveyed by the total contextual level, by the paragraph level, by the sentence phrase level, and by the word level. The interaction of these levels enables us to understand what is meant” (1985:102).

Thus the Louw-Nida team acknowledges the importance of associative meanings but do not see it as the task of their lexicon to address this issue. This is unfortunately also the reason why the lexicon is of limited help in understanding the media context and may allow for a literacy-biased interpretation of the texts. However, the Lexicon presents an excellent platform from which associative meanings can be further explored. (Perhaps a third Volume of the Louw-Nida Lexicon on the connotative meanings of words is called for to redress this issue.)

Stylistic level

When comparing the Greek text of Luke 9:51-56 with subsequent translations (Vulgate, RSV and NIV) a gradual process can be observed of how the features typical of oral-manuscript communication are smoothed out to enable a more acceptable literary reading. The Greek text shows an oral narrative rhythm that runs through the whole episode. Almost every new phrase is introduced by a conjunctive particle introducing a paratactic phrase (*de*, 3 times; *kai*, 5 times). A comparison with two English translations shows that the translators found it difficult to maintain this oral style (sometimes mistakenly called “Semitic” style¹⁴). The RSV modifies it in verses 51b and in 55. The NIV uses “and” only twice, and “but” only twice. It is clear that the modern translators, reconstructing the text in terms of a new medium – i.e., that of prose – transformed the oral conventions of the Greek text, whereas the Vulgate sought to maintain it.

This “oral style” is reflected by the abundance of formulaic expressions and repetitions that are somewhat difficult to gather from the translations. Examples are:

In the first 3 verses, the “face” of Jesus (*to prosōpon*) is repeated thrice. Whereas the RSV keeps on translating “face”, the word is altogether omitted by the NIV. Even the Vulgate found the repetitions cumbersome and alternates the word for face (*facies*) with *conspicuum* in verse 52.

14. Cf. Blass et alia, 1976:421 speaks of the “Semitic” parallels in the NT.

Also the Lukan word for village, *komē*, is alternatively translated in the Vulgate with *civis* and *castellum*. This is a clear sign that even the Vulgate already operated in a more literary climate than Luke. This tendency for stylistic variation can also be observed in some later variants of the Greek text, which use *polis* instead of *komē* in vs. 52.

In this short passage we also have an example of how the rhythm of the text, which serves to express the meaning of the message, is being suppressed by translations. In vs. 54 the natural rhythm of the narration in the previous series of expressions is halted by the foregrounding of the verb “saw” (*idōntes*). This signals a change in focus. However, in both English translations this quickening of the pace and the heightening of the tension is lost because of the protracted phrase used in translation, viz., “When the disciples James and John saw this.”

We can accept that during the processes of oral composition, recording the data in memory and the constant repetition of the materials, some transformation of the biblical materials already occurred. Some more transformations would have occurred during the actual writing down of the orally composed materials. In the introduction of the Gospel according to Luke (1:1-4) the author indeed mentions that he had made use of the oral tradition. He merely organised the information and committed it to manuscript. In spite of this explicit emphasis on writing in what has been called the most “literary” gospel, we still find overwhelming evidence that this written document was intended to be memorised and performed before audiences. This evidence is found in the repetitions, the redundancies and formulaic style employed in the gospel. The same is true of the epistles in the New Testament. We do not know whether the transformation from live speech to manuscript text were effected by a dictating author or the recording scribe, or both, but from the communal setting of (most) of the epistles we can safely assume that a community of believers were involved in the initial stages of composition and that the formulating and/or dictating author(s) and recording scribe only contributed to the final stages of the composition. Letters were intended to be “read” mainly from memory by authorised performers who could supply the necessary illocutionary force. Reader-performers were further expected to expand on the material in order to elicit the audience response required by the sending community. Such responses would include preserving the message in memory.¹⁵ Thus the manuscripts containing the letters, and possibly also the gospels, were merely superficial traces of a much richer communication process with a range of semiotic systems that were absent from the written record or weakly reflected in it.

Compensating for the Loss of Meaning

We have investigated some of the media transitions that underlay the text of the Bible. Inevitably printed translations with their linguistic and orthographic refinement only vaguely reflect the shift that occurred when the text was translated from a manuscript medium into the printed medium. When transitions that go even further back – e.g., shifts from Aramaic to Koine Greek, and from oral traditions to manuscript recordings – are taken into account, we get an indication of how complex it is to adequately reflect media usage

15. Such practices were still usual in the high manuscript culture of the Middle Ages. Carruthers is reported by Olson (1994:62): “The way to use a text [in the middle Ages] was to ‘ingest’ it and ‘digest’ it thoroughly, to extract its juices and to internalize its meaning, its *res*. And composing a text was not writing at all but composing mentally and performing orally and, on occasion, dictating from memory.” “Reading was not so much a matter of studying a text as ingesting or internalizing it. Once ingested, it could become the object of meditation and reflection. The scrutinized object was in the mind not in the text.” This method is ascribed to Aquinas by Carruthers (1990:6).

and media culture in translations of the Bible. In a certain sense the loss of media information and media context (in this case the properties of the oral and manuscript media of Biblical times) are the first victims of a modern translation. Would it ever be possible to compensate for this poverty in the translated Bible? It might perhaps be appropriate to speak of the impossibility of an adequate translation. Especially with regard to the Bible one has to establish that modern translations do not relieve the text of its orphan status in the Platonic sense. They are still lacking the voice that would supply the illocutionary force.

The question then remains what translators should do? A first suggestion is that our present translations be assessed with regard to the level on which they reflect their oral and manuscript origins. This would be a major enterprise and this author does not pretend to have done that. I would feel vindicated if this paper served as incentive for someone to do this. Such a project would look at the different modes of media usage as reflected in the Bible and in the modern translations. It would also have to examine the variety of oral performances and sound universes created by various translations – consider, e.g., differences in tone and pitch when the words of the *Our Father* prayer (Mt 6) is used in prayers, in hymns, in Roman Catholic Liturgy, in Pentecostal expository preaching, or in the hymns of the African Initiated Churches. It is clear that the enterprise of dismantling the text into kernel sentences and then to generate dynamic equivalent translations, runs the risk of reducing the associative meanings of the text.

The silent reader of translations from the KJV to the GNB should be sensitised to the danger of misreading the oral-manuscript text and context, and to the high level of interpretation that has gone into Bible translations. It might be inappropriate to print warnings on Bibles as on cigarette packages (*Warning! Silent reading leads to deficient understanding!*) but it might serve a purpose.

Another investigation suggested by this paper is that the technical terms presently used for translating speech act words, mental state words and words that in general have to do with writing-reading, speaking-listening, understanding-memorising, oral traditions-books, deserve new attention. The use of terms in translations that are associated by present readers with the practices and context of silent reading, are to say the least, misleading. Modern readers will have to be guided to “unthink” the reading strategies they have developed, something that David Olson has shown is extremely difficult to do.

In most “conservative” translations translators have tried to preserve as much of the sound patterns and rhythms of the ground texts as possible. The obvious problem of the interpreter is how to represent the rhythm truthfully without altering the propositional content. Recently there have been some developments in this field that can assist translators. Here one can refer to the study by J Harvey (1998) who analysed sound patterns in the Pauline corpus. M Dean has done something similar on the gospel materials.¹⁶ Both these scholars have shown that it is feasible and profitable to identify sound units in the text and to investigate how the units relate to each other. Such studies should form part of the translators’ equipment.

It is foreseen that for information on oral and manuscript usage the readers of modern translations will have to rely heavily on contextual information provided in footnotes and prefaces. Readers should be assisted in imagining the communicative setting and ambience in which messages were produced and received. Without an understanding of orality and manuscript culture it is also impossible to understand the intellectual, social, economic and political conditions of the time.

16. Unpublished presentation at the group for Bible in Ancient and Modern Media at the SBL.

Recently an exciting project for producing a Bible translation that is suited for memorisation and oral performance came to my attention.¹⁷ One would assume that in such a translation the repetitions and redundancies of the ground text would not be suppressed or smoothed out. Such a translation will honour the need for brevity and will thus not indulge in extensive paraphrases. A further feature that can be foreseen is that it will provide some clue of the (possible) illocutionary force/speech act of a specific unit of speech. As in special translations that are made for the deaf, the indications of bodily movement and gesture will be enhanced. Of course, no translation, not even one produced for oral performance would resemble the force of the original. There still would be a difference in memory aids.¹⁸ But one can foresee that such translations will at least remedy some of the gross misunderstandings that exist, and that some of the power of the original will be recovered.

From our deliberations thus far it is clear that our reading practices, encouraged by the clarity and fluency of modern translations, almost inevitably leads the silent reader into biblicism. The readers are led to treat the text as they would treat other modern texts, viz., with regard to consistency, canonicity, manipulability, feedback, structure, etc.

Galatians 3:1-2 provides a glimpse of how the oral tradition functioned in the early church. Reading between the lines we can gather that the oral performance of the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion resulted in the reception of the Holy Spirit (possibly through ecstatic manifestations). Thus was the force and effect of the oral performance of the gospel. The question is whether some of this power of the original can be regained through our scholarly input. There is no reason why something of the force of the oral gospel that was preached far into the second century cannot be retrieved. It is now time to resurrect the forgotten audience and the oral performances that moved them.

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17. This information comes from Pastor Weldon Nisly of the Mennonite Church, Seattle, who is active in the Biblical Storytellers Society.

18. From a private interview with Anthonissen, University of the Western Cape.

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