

FUNDAMENTALISTS FACE DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

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DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE APPEARS ON THE SCENE

Good News for Modern Man, the book title suggested by United Bible Societies (UBS) translation consultant Eugene Nida for the *Today's English Version* (TEV), appeared on the scene in 1966. At first glance it appeared to be a typical translation by liberals, though freer in its renderings than most. However, it ignited a firestorm among evangelicals. The most commonly opposed rendering in the new Bible was “death” for the Greek word αἷμα when referring to Christ’s blood.¹

Fundamentalists went ballistic. Charles Woodbridge wrote, “In my opinion, the version of the New Testament known as Good News for Modern Man is not only a poor work of exegetical scholarship. It also poses a deadly threat to Biblical orthodoxy.” Then he launched what he called a “vehement attack” on the TEV.²

Stewart Custer and Marshall Neil wrote, “There are some serious errors in the TEV, however, that distort the plain message of the New Testament. We cannot keep silent and see the perversion of the truth of God.”³

E. L. Bynum was uncharacteristically mild when he wrote, “Thank God for a few who have spoken out on the subject. May this cause others to make a serious study of this poor translation of the Bible, and to sound the alarm.”⁴

According to M. L. Moser, Jr., “Some may accuse us of ignoring favorable things that could be said about the TEV but when there is arsenic in a loaf of bread, one does not spend time discussing the good ingredients of the bread, but warns against the arsenic. The changes and defects in TEV (sic) we have pointed out here are more dangerous to human souls than arsenic to the body.”⁵

¹ For example, the TEV translates Rom. 5:9 as, “By his death (αἷμα) we are now put right with God.”

² Charles Woodbridge, “Cutting Out Redemption by the Blood” (Wisconsin Rapids, WI: Rapids Christian Press, ND, 1-2) 1-2.

³ Stewart Custer and Marshall Neil, *Good News for Modern Man: a Critique* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1970), 3.

⁴ E. L. Bynum, “Why We Reject This Version” (Gospel Tract Society, Inc., ND).

⁵ M. L. Moser, Jr., *Good News for Modern Man, 'The Devil's Masterpiece'* (Little Rock, AR:

AN ENTIRELY NEW TRANSLATION THEORY

What few people, even evangelical scholars, realized at the time was that the TEV was the first ever English translation using a new method of translation called dynamic equivalence (DE).⁶ Eugene Nida first delineated his new theory in 1964 in his seminal work, *Toward a Science of Translating*.⁷ This work, though little known at the time, would help launch the brand new secular scholarly discipline of translation studies, as is acknowledged in various secular sources.

Eugene Nida (1914-2011) started out his career by attempting to fulfill his dream to be a Bible translator for a tribe in Mexico. Unfortunately illness prevented this. After returning to the homeland, he went on to receive a master's degree in classical Greek at the University of Southern California, then a Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Michigan. He then served as a translation consultant with the American Bible Society for many years.

His background in Greek and linguistics served him well as he traveled around the world advising Bible translators in various efforts from tribal translations to first world projects. During this time he wrote books on linguistics, Bible translation, etc. He also began to develop his new theory of translation. An interesting fact in this connection is that Nida himself was never a Bible translator, but in training a linguist. He himself wrote, "I have never translated a chapter of the Bible for publication, nor have I ever been a member of a translating committee. I am simply a linguist specializing in

The Challenge Press, 1970).

⁶ Philip C. Stine, *Let the Words be Written* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 81-82; Eugene Nida, *Fascinated by Languages* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publ. Co., 2003), 70.

⁷ Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1964). Nida became dissatisfied with this term and changed it to "functional equivalence" in a 1986 book by Nida and Jan De Waard entitled *One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation*. However, some scholars of Bible translation such as Dave Brunn continue to use the DE term to this day. Secular authors using the DE term include Susan Bassnett, Guiseppe Palumbo, Anthony Pym, Ernest Gertzler (when referring directly to Nida) and Jin Di. Lawrence Venuti uses both terms.

language and cultural anthropology.”⁸

THE THEORETICAL BASES FOR NIDA’S THEORY

There were several theoretical influences on Nida’s theory. One was the code theory of modern linguistics. In this view of language and translation, the speaker encodes the message into language and the hearer decodes it. (This explanation is of necessity greatly simplified.) Therefore in translation, the translator decodes the original document in the source language, then translates it into the target language in such a way that the reader can easily decode it. Code theory in translation has come under scrutiny in recent years by advocates of a new theory of communication called relevance theory. Bible translator and translation theorist Ernst-August Gutt writes, “There are many aspects of human communication for which the code model simply cannot account.”⁹

Another basis for Nida’s DE was the transformational grammar theory of Noam Chomsky (also called generative grammar). This theory does have promise for helping translators go through the steps of translation, and has also been embraced by James Price in his optimal equivalence model of translation.¹⁰ In Chomsky’s conception this theory is only for understanding a particular language, but Nida and Price have adapted it for translation work. (The theory is perhaps too complex to explain completely in this short paper.)

The third theoretical basis for DE is the one that should concern fundamentalists the most, and that is Nida’s existentialism, coming out in his theology as neo-orthodoxy. Nida wrote in detail about his view of existentialism in his book, *Religion Across Cultures*.¹¹ Nida’s friend and hagiographer Philip Stine wrote, “Nida drew on the

⁸ *Fascinated by Language*, 136. This is Nida’s biographical work about his years as a translation consultant. Other biographical information in this paper is also taken from this work.

⁹ Ernst-August Gutt, *Relevance Theory* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, and New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 11.

¹⁰ See James Price’s magnum opus, *A Theory For Biblical Translation: An Optimal Equivalence Model* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

¹¹ Eugene Nida, *Religion Across Cultures* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1968), 55-56,

existentialist philosophers, particularly Ludwig Wittgenstein, who held that the meaning of any word is a matter of what we do with our language.”¹²

Nida himself wrote in detail how existentialism was a theoretical basis for his theory in his first work on DE:

Those who espouse the traditional, orthodox view of inspiration quite naturally focus attention on the presumed readings of the “autographs.” The result is that, directly or indirectly, they often tend to favor quite close, literal renderings as the best way of preserving the inspiration of the writer by the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, those who hold the neo-orthodox view, or who have been influenced by it, tend to be freer in their translating; as they see it, since the original document inspired its readers because it spoke meaningfully to them, only an equally meaningful translation can have this same power to inspire present-day receptors. It would be quite wrong, however, to assume that all those who emphasize fully meaningful translations necessarily hold to a neo-orthodox view of inspiration; for those who have combined orthodox theology with deep evangelistic or missionary convictions have been equally concerned with the need for making translations entirely meaningful. If the problem of describing the area covered by a particular linguistic symbol is difficult, the assigning of boundaries is even more so. The basic reason is that no word ever has precisely the same meaning twice, for each speech event is in a sense unique, involving participants who are constantly changing and referents which are never fixed.¹³

Note that fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals will automatically disagree with Nida’s opposition to an inerrant Scripture.¹⁴ However, proving that Nida’s doctrine in this area has an effect on a translation produced by the DE method is problematic. Therefore this paper concentrates on the existential principle of DE and how it affects actual translation.

72-73.

¹² Stine. 143. See also 144 for more detail about Nida’s existentialism.

¹³ *Toward a Science of Translating*, 47-48.

¹⁴ For more on Nida’s belief in an errant Scripture, see *Fascinated by Languages*, 92, etc.

DEFINING DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

How then does this theoretical basis of existentialism affect the translator's work in practice? The answer lies in a proper definition of DE. Going straight to the source, Nida defined it thus: "dynamic equivalence: quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the RESPONSE of the RECEPTOR is essentially like that of the original receptors" (emphasis in the original).¹⁵

The words "response" and "receptor" are key words here, chosen purposefully by Nida.¹⁶ It is worth noting here that in the secular field of translation studies, the term receptor is not used except by scholars specifically referring to DE. The usual word used by secular scholars and translators is "target," as in "target language." Secular scholar of translation studies Giuseppe Palumbo wrote, "He makes a point of talking about *receptor* language instead of target language so as to stress the fact that in translation a message is 'received' by readers rather than 'shot' at a target."¹⁷

Unfortunately, some scholars have not understood this point that in DE the importance is placed on the reception of the modern reader more so than on the exact syntax and semantics of the original documents. For example, Stanley Porter wrote concerning secular scholar Lawrence Venuti's criticisms of DE, "He contends that Nida's emphasis upon 'naturalness of expression' involves domestication, such that unrecognizable source language features are replaced by those in the target language. When Nida argues for accuracy in translation, Venuti claims, he is arguing for creating the same effect in the target-language readers as was produced in the source-language readers."¹⁸ However, equivalent effect in the target language readers is not just Venuti's impression

¹⁵ Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969, 1982), 200.

¹⁶ Stine, 40.

¹⁷ Giuseppe Palumbo, *Key Terms in Translation Studies* (New York: Continuum International Publ. Group, 2009), 169.

¹⁸ Stanley E. Porter and Mark J. Boda, ed., *Translating the New Testament*, "Assessing Translation Theory," by Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co, 2009), 140.

of Nida's theory, it is what Nida himself taught. Porter has apparently misunderstood DE.

The reference to Venuti's work by Porter is especially interesting in view of Venuti's secular approach to translation. Venuti, following Schleirmacher, teaches that there are two kinds of translation, domesticized translation, in which the original work is adapted to the target culture, and foreignized translation, in which the translator seeks to preserve the culture of the original. His works have had a great influence in the world of secular translation studies. In the light of his two categories of translation, his view of DE is negative. He wrote,

Eugene Nida, drawing on research from the American Bible Society, considers the problem of translating between different realities. He argues that solutions need to be ethnological, based on the translator's acquisition of sufficient 'cultural information.' Since 'it is inconceivable to a Maya Indian that any place should not have vegetation unless it has been cleared for a maize-field,' Nida concludes that the Bible translator 'must translate "desert" as an "abandoned place"' to establish 'the cultural equivalent of the desert of Palestine' (Nida 1945:197). Here translation is paraphrase. It works to reduce linguistic and cultural differences to a shared referent. Yet the referent is clearly a core of meaning constructed by the translator and weighted toward the receiving culture so as to be comprehensible there.¹⁹

For the purpose of this paper we will examine semantics as an area in which the existential reception by the reader becomes most important in DE, though syntax is just as important in the theory. As seen in a quote already given, in Nida's view, "No word ever has precisely the same meaning twice, for each speech event is in a sense unique, involving participants who are constantly changing and referents which are never fixed."²⁰ This view sees an existential event every time a reader reads the Bible. As theology students learn, neo-orthodoxy, or existential theology, teaches that the Bible is not the Word of God per se, but becomes the Word of God as it speaks to the reader. This existential experience is what Nida wants for the reader of a Bible translation done according to DE theory.

¹⁹ Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd. ed., preface to the 1940's to 1950's section written by Venuti (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 113.

²⁰ *Toward a Science of Translating*, 48.

It should be emphasized here that DE is a departure from traditional methods of free translation because of the emphasis on reader response, meaning how the receptor reacts to the decoded message. Note the following definition of free translation, which does not coincide with Nida's definition of DE as already quoted. "Free translation is usually taken to concentrate on conveying the meaning of the ST disregarding the formal or structural aspects of the ST."²¹ Again, Mario Pei and Frank Gaynor write, "free translation: the rendering of the meaning of a statement, expression, text, etc., in another language, without following the original accurately."²²

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

This brings us back to the rendering of "death" for αἷμα in the TEV which was so opposed by fundamentalist and other conservative writers. At the time the version first was published as *Good News for Modern Man*, Nida's DE method was virtually unknown among evangelicals, and particularly among fundamentalists. Thus the assumption was made that the rendering was simply due to the liberal aversion to the blood of Jesus Christ as washing away sin. The truth is more complicated. This rendering was evidently due to the translation method of Robert Bratcher, the translator, which was designed to produce an "equivalent effect" in the modern reader's mind to what the translator believed was produced in a first century reader.

For evidence of this we turn to Nida's seminal work on communication, published some years before his first work on DE (*Toward a Science of Translating*), where he wrote, "In a children's meeting on an Indian reservation in the United States, the missionary asked the boys and girls, 'How are we saved?' to which everyone responded in unison, 'By the blood.' But what did this symbol, 'blood,' mean to them? Certainly it did not mean the same as to the missionary, as was evident in the fact that the children never spoke of 'the blood' except in answer to that particular question in the catechism."²³

²¹ Giuseppe Palumbo, *Key Terms in Translation Studies* (New York: Continuum International Publ. Group, 2009), 49.

²² Mario Pei and Frank Gaynor, *Dictionary of Linguistics* (Towata, NJ: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1967), 77. "ST" in this quote refers to "source text."

²³ Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1960),

Again Nida wrote, “Or it may be that we become very fondly attached to some word, and before long we have made an idol of it, even as the heathen make idols of wood. Words such as *blood, trinity, sanctification, authority, infallibility* and immersion have been particularly subject to this kind of treatment by various people, who in all sincerity thought that they had found in these words a touchstone of truth or a symbol of spiritual reality.”²⁴

The conclusion to be drawn here is that Nida was already questioning the semantic content of the Greek word αἷμα in reference to the blood of Christ as early as 1960, and already framing his theory based on the response of the reader. Thus, Nida’s close associate Bratcher, translating by DE, rendered αἷμα by “death” in the first editions of *Good News for Modern Man*. “In response to extensive conservative criticism, the 1966 translation ‘sacrificial death’ was relegated in 1994 a footnote and replaced in the text by ‘blood,’ except (for reasons not entirely clear) in Rev 1.5; 5.9, where ‘sacrificial death’ was retained.”²⁵

This brings us to study in more detail what kind of translation the DE method produces. Examples of good DE renderings Nida gives in his first book on the method include: “white as egret feathers” instead of “white as snow”²⁶ (Is. 1:18) and “give one another a hearty handshake all around” (Phillips) instead of “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16).²⁷

Regardless of how Christian scholars view this second rendering, it in particular has received short shrift among some secular scholars. Susan Bassnett wrote in her textbook on translation studies, “With this example of what seems to be a piece of inadequate translation in poor taste, the weakness of Nida’s loosely defined types can clearly be seen.”²⁸

62.

²⁴ Ibid, 69; italics in the original.

²⁵ Paul Ellingworth. “We Must Have Blood.” (*The Bible Translator*, Vol. 60, Num. 1, Jan. 2009), 6.

²⁶ *Toward a Science of Translation*, 158.

²⁷ Ibid, 160.

²⁸ Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1980, 1991,

Jin Di, a Chinese scholar with whom Nida co-authored a book, eventually broke with Nida over this very rendering. He wrote in his revision of their book, “The rendering ‘a hearty handshake all around’ is completely unacceptable—one may call it an out-of-control transformation—firstly because it alters the principal fact of the kiss and secondly because the original atmosphere of religious simplicity has been replaced with one which rather suggests the busy vote-solicitors in an American election campaign.”²⁹ Again, Di writes, “The ‘hearty handshake all around’ alteration is a failure because it causes an important loss which could easily be prevented.”³⁰

Many more examples could be given both from Nida’s writings and from various translations. However, this brief sampling should be sufficient for the purposes of this paper.

CONCLUSION

Is the *New International Version* a DE translation? What about the *New Revised Standard Version*? Before making such judgements, sufficient knowledge and understanding is essential. When fundamentalists understand that DE means that the renderings are done with the response of the reader as primary, and are not simply free renderings, it becomes easier to discern which translations were done with the DE method, and critique them intelligently and responsibly. Too often fundamentalists have jumped into the fray with swords waving, only to learn too late that their information was faulty and their understanding incomplete. It is hoped that this paper will contribute in some small way to fundamentalist comprehension of the DE method and to responsible scholarship when discussing and critiquing it.

2002), 32.

²⁹ Eugene Nida and Jin Di, *On Translation*, 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, 2006), 211.

³⁰ Nida and Di, 215.

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