

INTRODUCTION TO SPANISH TRANSLATION

SECOND EDITION



JACK CHILD

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UPA Acquisitions Department (301) 459-3366

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Cover photo: The classic interpreter's position between principals:
Dominican Republic President Joaquín Balaguer, the interpreter,
and LtGen Gordon Sumner, US Army, Inter-American Defense
Board. *La Revista de las Fuerzas Armadas*. Dominican Republic,
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**For the teachers, colleagues, friends and students
who have shared the walk across this modest bridge
between our two languages, English and Spanish.**

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PREFACE.

This text evolved from my experiences in seventeen years of teaching translation in the Department of Language and Foreign Studies of The American University. In the Spring 1984 Semester the Department offered its first Spanish Translation course as part of a new Certificate in Translation. It soon became clear that there was strong student interest in translation and its practical applications

The texts used in the introductory translation course varied from year to year, but no single satisfactory book or combination of texts was found. Some were too theoretical and required a strong linguistics background; others were narrowly limited to commercial or legal aspects. We collected various materials and approaches which had proven their worth, and during three trips to Antarctica and the Malvinas/Falklands Islands on a sabbatical semester in Spring 1989 wrote the first draft of this present text. It has been refined and further developed in each course offering since, leading up to this second edition, which also served as a sabbatical project..

This book is designed for a third or fourth year college Spanish course. It is an introduction to the history, theory and practice of Spanish-to-English translation (there is also some consideration of English-to-Spanish translation). The 24 lessons in the text form the basis for a 14-week semester course, and each of the lessons includes brief segments on: the history of translation and the profession; introduction to theory of translation; translation problems and techniques; false cognates between Spanish and English; proverbs, idioms, and colloquial Spanish; and translation “tidbits” (brief comments on the nature of translation and humorous mistranslation).

The book includes 23 exercises geared to the material in each lesson. Suggested solutions and a course syllabus are available from the author: Dr Jack Child, Department of Language and Foreign Studies, The American University, Washington, DC, 20016. (Tel: 202-885-2385; email: jchild@american.edu. Also consult my Facebook page and Departmental bio).

Although as author I am, of course, responsible for any errors or omissions, a large number of colleagues, friends and students contributed more than their share to this project. Within the University, Department Chairs Anthony Caprio and John Schillinger were constantly supportive, as were colleagues in the Spanish and Latin American Studies group: Amy Oliver, Consuelo Hernández, Ana Serra, Barbara Fick, María Consuelo Gall, Amanda Sharp Hussey, Brenda Werth, Danusia Meson, Jeanne Downey-Vanover, Covadonga Fuertes, Pedro Vidal, Hugo Pineda, Oscar Salazar, Diane Russell-Pineda, Claudia Cicedo, Florencia Cortés Conde, Olga Rojer, Hope

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In preparing this second edition I contacted a number of translation teachers who had used the book and offered comments, corrections and suggestions. Particularly helpful were the responses of Gloria Gálvez-Carlisle, Char Chrysler, Sid Love, and Mary-Ann Gosser. Leslie Morginson-Eitzen, *colega, compañera y amiga*, contributed with her usual patience and understanding, as did Evita Canal de Beagle, Mayo and La Perrichola. The word processing was done with the help of María Macarena and María Mactusi.

Washington, June 2009.

LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION

This introductory Lesson will briefly explain the content of the six different sections you will find in each of the 23 lessons which follow.

A. HISTORY OF TRANSLATION.

The first portion of each lesson will consist of a short note on the history of translation and the development of the profession. The principal figures in the development of translation theory will be mentioned, and some of their ideas will be further developed in part C of each lesson, which deals with theory.

It is important from the beginning to distinguish between the terms “translation” and “interpretation.” We will follow the usage employed by the profession, which links “translation” with the written word, and “interpretation” with the spoken word. This convention is not always followed by the media and you will frequently hear television commentators referring to “the voice of the translator,” when it is in fact the voice of the interpreter you are hearing.

As will be seen in the history sections of the following 23 lessons, the history of translation and interpretation are closely intertwined. Mankind spoke before writing, and communication between tribes and nations that spoke different languages or dialects required interpretation long before their thoughts or messages were reduced to writing and thus required translation.

The history of translation and interpretation (T/I) developed in the lessons which follow emphasizes T/I in Western Europe (especially Spain), and Latin America after the Conquest. It necessarily thus ignores the equally rich history of T/I in non-European languages.

B. TRANSLATION TIDBIT.

The “Translation Tidbit” in each lesson will give you a short anecdote, horrible example, or description relating to translation. It is intended as a sort of break between the more serious sections dealing with History (Part A) and Theory (Part C).

Here is an example:

Marcy Powell tells of a Christmas card from a Chilean student that included this greeting: “May the Lord bless and can you.” We can assume that the student

used the first of two dictionary definitions of the Spanish word “preservar”: “to can, preserve.” The lesson: never trust a dictionary.
(Marcy Powell, “Traduttore Traditore,” *Verbatim*, Su. 1983, p. 16).

C. THEORY OF TRANSLATION.

In this section of each lesson we will examine one or two basic theoretical concepts dealing with translation. The emphasis will be on those concepts with the greatest practical value for understanding and carrying out Spanish-English translation. The theory of translation has grown considerably in the past few decades along with advances in linguistics and communications theory. Thus, this section of each chapter can only scratch the surface of available ideas from translation theory. If you would like to explore this field in greater depth, consult the Bibliography, especially the following authors: Eugene Nida, Mildred Larson, George Steiner, Theodore Savory, J.C. Catford, and for Spanish, Gerardo Vázquez-Ayora and Valentín García Yebra.

D. TRANSLATION PROBLEMS AND TECHNIQUES.

In this portion of each lesson we will explore specific problems and techniques of some aspect of translation. There will be a mix (in no particular order) of:

- grammatical problems
- lexical (word) problems
- miscellaneous problems in Spanish-English translating
- translation for special purposes (commercial, legal, medical, etc.)
- information on the translation profession.

E. COGNATES.

This section will provide you with some of the more troublesome false cognates and partial cognates which may cause you problems in translating, especially from Spanish to English. A cognate is a word in one language which looks like, or has a similar root, as a word in a second language. Cognates may be valid (“true friends”) if the spelling and meaning is identical or almost the same in both languages. Examples in Spanish-English translation would be: mapa = map; programa = program. On the other hand, the translator has to be careful with false cognates (words which look alike but have totally different meanings), such as sopa ≠ soap; ropa ≠ rope. (The notation “≠” means “does not equal”). Even more difficult at times are the partial cognates, where the two words share some meaning across the languages, but also have additional meanings in one language.

In section F of each lesson which follows, the notation “fc” stands for “false cognate,” while “pfc” will represent “partial false cognate,” and “pc” will mean

“partial cognate.” The “=” sign will mean “equals,” while “≠” will stand for “not equal” (false cognate). The words in capital letters on the left are the Spanish original words, with English equivalents or false cognate definitions given on the right hand side. Where appropriate, the word will also be set in a short phrase to illustrate the meaning. Here are some examples from [Lesson 2](#):

ACTUAL (fc) ≠ actual or real.

= current, present: “mi hogar actual está aquí en Washington.”

ADICTO (pc) = addicted to a vice

Also = partisan or follower: “soy adicto de Menem.”

ADMITIR (pfc) = to admit that something is true.

≠ permit entrance to a show; instead use “dar entrada.”

F. PROVERBS AND IDIOMS.

In this section you will be presented with a few idiomatic expressions and proverbs from the Spanish. These are important because although they are generally untranslatable on a word-for-word basis, they usually have equivalents in English. Unfortunately, the translator must be familiar with these equivalents because any attempt to translate them word-for-word will probably result in awkward or meaningless translations.

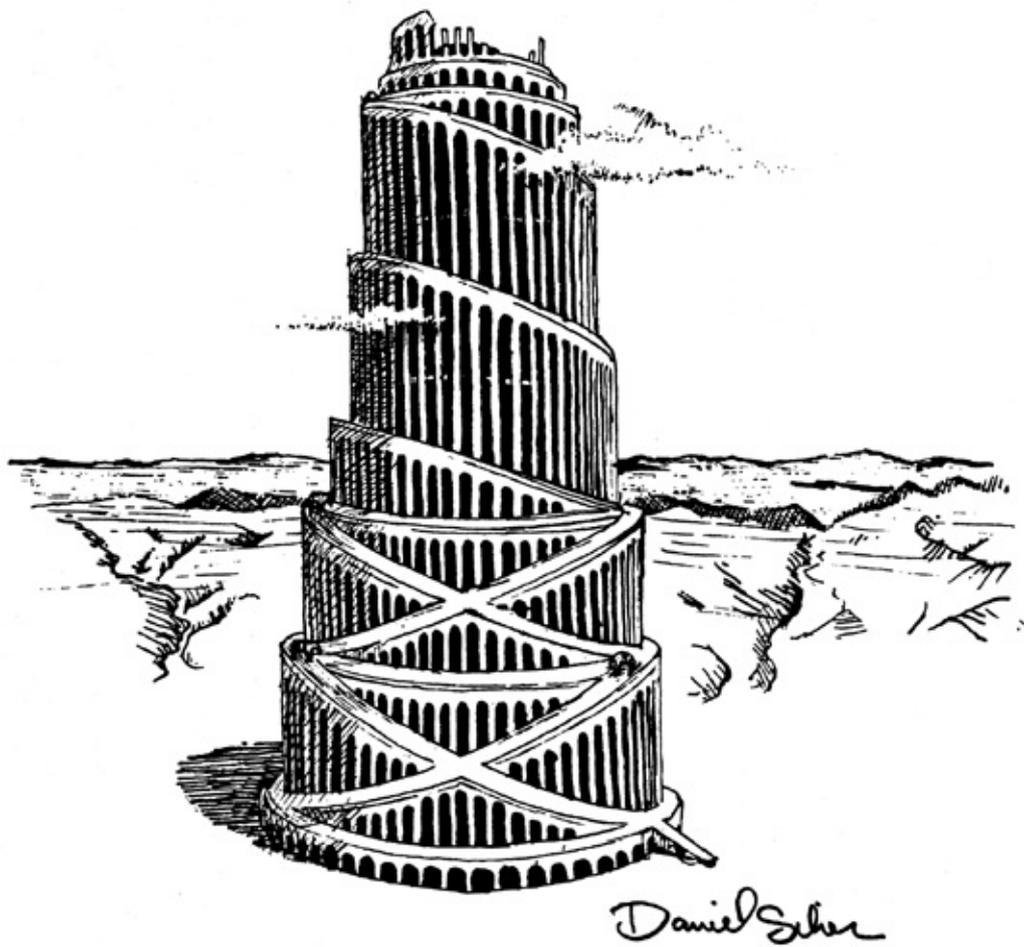


Figure 1-1: The Tower of Babel

LESSON 2

A. HISTORY OF TRANSLATION.

Translation and Interpretation in Ancient Times.

The need for translators and interpreters stems from the linguistic diversity of humankind. There are today somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 languages spoken on earth, and from the perspective of historical linguistics the evolution of these languages is linked to the evolution of man's diverse cultures over the face of the planet. Language, after all, is the most basic expression of culture, and from a Darwinian viewpoint it would be only natural to expect languages to evolve in different directions given the different experiences each tribe or nationality experienced in a different set of geographic and cultural surroundings. But man's situation is biologically unique: in no other species are groups of that species so cut off from each other because of communication problems.

The Biblical explanation for the diversity of languages is found in the story of the Tower of Babel, as told in Genesis 11. After the great Deluge the descendants of Noah wandered onto the plain of Shinar in Babylonia (Mesopotamia), and there in their arrogance decided to build a tower high enough to reach Heaven. An angry Jehovah punished their temerity by taking away their common language and giving them different ones, thus confusing and frustrating them since they could no longer understand each other. They subsequently scattered over the face of the earth in separate linguistic and tribal groups that account for the diversity of humanity's tongues and cultures. The etymology (word origin) of "Babel" is significant: the word Babel or Babylon is linked to both an Assyrian word meaning "gate of God," and a Hebrew root word, "balal," meaning "to confuse."¹

Regardless of the explanation, ancient humans had a need for interpreters and translators from the first days when the different tribal groupings came into contact with each other for the purpose of trade, diplomacy, or conquest. The Old Testament of the Bible contains many references to the need for interpreters, for example in Genesis 42:23 when Joseph, governor of Egypt, had to use them to communicate with his famine-stricken Israelite brothers.² Although most of the people of Biblical antiquity spoke similar Semitic languages, Egyptian was different, and this caused a difficult linguistic barrier. Moses, raised by the Pharaoh's daughter, drew some of his leadership from the fact that he was bilingual in the Egyptian and the Semitic

languages, and this helped him lead the Jews out of their Egyptian bondage.

Trade, diplomacy and military activity in the Mediterranean Basin in ancient times required large numbers of skilled interpreters. The ancient function of “scribe” was quite frequently associated with that of bilingual recorder of information, with the associated skill of translating or interpreting that information. Apparently most of these early translators or interpreters learned their craft through travel, contact with other cultures, or the sheer lucky happenstance of being born to a bilingual marriage or living abroad as children (these are still today some of the most common ways interpreters, but not necessarily translators, acquire their basic skills). But there were also exceptional cases when carefully selected young people were sent abroad to learn a second language through what we today call “immersion.” In the sixth century B.C. the Pharaoh Psamtik II created the caste of interpreters in Egypt when he sent a considerable number of Egyptian boys to Greece to learn the language of that country. Later Alexander the Greek ordered that some 30,000 Persian boys learn Greek to satisfy the linguistic requirements of his conquests, and Quintus Sertorius, who ruled Spain for eight years, required that children of noble birth should study both Latin and Greek.³

The linguists who were trained in this (and other) fashion were frequently accorded special status as diplomats or emissaries of the ruler. In their travels they sometimes learned the hard way one of the occupational hazards of the translator/interpreter: when the message is an unpleasant one, it is easy to blame the messenger. Plutarch’s *Lives* records that a Greek interpreter at the Persian embassy in Athens was killed by a mob which was offended because he used the Greek language to express the demands of barbarians.⁴

B. TRANSLATION TIDBIT.

Ronald Reagan tells a story about a visit to Mexico, when he gave a speech in English to a large audience. He then sat down and a Mexican got up and spoke in Spanish. Since everyone else was applauding the Mexican every few minutes, Reagan did also. After a while the U.S. Ambassador leaned over and whispered to Reagan: “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. He’s interpreting your speech.”⁵

C. THEORY OF TRANSLATION.

What is translation?

The simplest answer to this basic theoretical question is that translation is communication across the barriers posed by the Babel of different languages spoken and written by mankind. The very simplicity of this answer is deceptive. When we first learn a foreign language, we usually look for simple and direct equivalences between a thing, action or thought in the foreign language and the same thing, action or thought in our own language. At an elementary language level

we can usually find these equivalences, and this is the basis of the so-called “direct translation” method of language instruction. Our teachers tend to gloss over the more subtle differences between the languages in the understandable desire to get the basic points across with a minimum of confusion. And so, since we “translate” every time we speak or write the foreign language, we get the idea that translation is simply a matter of being able to use two languages. This first experience with translation in a foreign language classroom also has the unfortunate effect of suggesting that each word in one language has an equivalent word in every other language. The resulting emphasis on “word-for-word” translation is one of the curses of the beginning translator.

The great Mexican writer (and translator) Octavio Paz has gone even further, saying that when we first learn to speak our own language, we are learning to “translate” between the world of our infantile ideas and the world of the spoken word: “Aprender a hablar es aprender a traducir; cuando el niño pregunta a su madre el significado de esta o aquella palabra, lo que realmente le pide es que traduzca a su lenguaje el término desconocido.”⁶

The etymology of the word “translate” begins with the Latin root word “translatus,” meaning to transfer or move from one point to another. Applied to our concept of communications, translation would then involve the movement or transfer of a message from the language we start from (we will call this the “source language,” or SL) to the language we want to end up in (we will call this the “target language,” or TL). The equivalent Spanish terms are “lengua origen - LO” and “lengua término - LT.”

But overcoming the obstacles posed by Babel is not as simple as it looks. It turns out, unhappily, that in many cases there is no exact equivalence between words (the lexicon) in two different languages. Furthermore, at the grammatical (syntactical) level languages are different and have different ways of saying what appear to be (but are frequently not quite) the same things. And finally, there is the nettlesome problem of the idiomatic expression, metaphor or proverb which is frequently so imbedded in the culture of a language that we commit serious mistakes if we try to work at the word-for-word level. The Italians, who have had much experience with translation and its traps, sum up this problem in a neat two word cliché: “traduttore, tradittore”⁷ (translator, traitor).

The translator quickly learns that he or she must inevitably make some hard choices between emphasizing the *form* (i.e., the words), and the *content* (i.e. the ideas and meaning) of the message being transferred from SL to TL. The temptation is to fall back on the words, because they are clear and identifiable. The challenge is to be sure that you have grasped the SL author’s basic idea in the message and successfully conveyed that meaning in the target language in words that seem natural and even elegant in the TL.

It has been said that translation is impossible in the sense that one cannot

accomplish this conveying of meaning at the same time as one is respectful of the form of the message. But translation, like politics, is the art of the possible and the necessary. The translator will have to make choices between imperfect alternatives. The purist will say that perfect translation is impossible, but it is an important human activity and must be attempted. Even if the end result is only an approximation, that approximation is better than never to have attempted the transfer of the idea from SL to TL.

Here are some other answers to the rhetorical question posed at the beginning of this section. Translation is:

- communication in the technical sense of moving a message generated by a transmitter through a communication process and channel, with distortions and noise, to a receiver.
- a decoding and coding process in which a thought in the SL is broken down into its elements, then moved into the TL through a coding procedure.
- a process of analyzing the SL message to find its deeper meaning, transferring it, then synthesizing it into the forms of the TL.
- an attempt to produce the equivalent effect on the TL audience as the thought or message had on the SL audience.
- the process by which a basic deep meaning is found beyond the words of the SL, and then ways are sought to produce the same deep meaning in the TL.

Application: the bits and pieces of translation theory we will be exploring will not make a bad translator into a good one, and there are many good translators who have never even thought about translation theory. But an appreciation of some of the theoretical underpinnings of translation will make us more sensitive to how it works (or why it didn't). Theory will also provide some guidelines for making the choices a translator is always faced with.⁸ The fact that some of these guidelines suggested by theory are contradictory adds to the challenge of making the choices, and should remind us once again that translation is not as easy as it seems at first glance.

D. TRANSLATION PROBLEMS AND TECHNIQUES.

Articles, Prepositions, Pronouns and Adjectives.

Articles: The principal problem encountered with articles is that Spanish uses them more than English. Thus, the native Spanish speaker tends to commit an Hispanicism by overusing articles when translating into English, and the native speaker of English tends to commit an Anglicism by under-using articles when translating into Spanish. The problem is very noticeable with the definite article:

“the streetcar called ‘Desire’ ” should be translated as “el tranvía llamado ‘El Deseo’ ” and not “el tranvía llamado ‘Deseo’ .”

“Juan apostó en el caballo número siete” should be translated as “Juan bet on horse number seven,” and not “Juan bet on the horse number seven.”

“Man is mortal” should be translated as “El hombre es mortal” and

not “Hombre es mortal.”

“I like books” = “me gustan los libros,” and not “me gustan libros.”

This type of Anglicism creates an excessively telegraphic style in Spanish which is sometimes used as a parody of the English-speaker who knows only a little Spanish, and not very correct Spanish at that: “Yo tomar avión para ir Argentina donde dar papel en conferencia.”

Prepositions. It has been said that the life and originality of a language is contained in its prepositions and how they are used.⁹ Differences between one language and another are often emphasized in these forms of speech (which express the relationship between other parts of the sentence), than in more standard parts of the sentence such as nouns, verbs or articles. There are relatively few prepositions, but they are used very frequently and thus the translator must be on guard against misusing them. For the Spanish-English translator the problem is compounded by the fact that Spanish has only twenty prepositions, while English has considerably more: 65, by one count.¹⁰ Non-native speakers are frequently betrayed by subtle misuses of prepositions because there are few logical rules to govern their use. Much of the usage is simply idiosyncratic and must be learned by memorization or constant exposure and use.

The Spanish preposition “en” (which can be translated as either “in,” “on,” or “at”), accounts for much of this confusion. In the phrase “el libro está en el escritorio” it is not clear whether the book is inside or on top of the desk, and the correct choice will depend on additional information.

In many expressions the preposition is omitted when translating, but there are also cases where the preposition is added when translating:

“El juez miró al cuadro” “The judge looked at the painting”

“He attends the University” “Asiste a la universidad”

“I knew Juan” “Yo conocí a Juan.”

The English preposition “for” can be translated in Spanish as “por” or “para,” generally depending on whether we are expressing cause (por) or goal (para):

“He came for his book” “Vino por su libro”

“She studied in order to learn” “Estudió para aprender”

Spanish requires the preposition “a” before verbs of motion and to indicate a person as a direct object:

“comenzó a correr” “he began to run”

“Pedro loves Mary” “Pedro ama a María.”

Pronouns. The Spanish use of familiar and formal forms of the second person pronoun (tú/usted; vosotros, -as/ustedes). creates translation problems. Frequently, when going from English into Spanish, the translator must make choices between the formal and informal depending on the general tone of the passage. When dealing with colloquial dialogue, the translator must also be aware of regionalisms, such as the use of “Vos” in the River Plate area.

Secondary uses of pronouns can also cause problems. For example, English frequently uses the editorial “we” when the deep meaning is really referring to a different pronoun, which is the one the translator must use in going into the TL:

“the nurse said, ‘let’s take our medicine, shall we’,” which should be translated as:
“la enfermera me dijo que tomara la medicina.”

Adjectives. The position of adjectives follows general rules (English before the noun, Spanish after), but there is a small class of Spanish adjectives which can go in either location, and whose meaning will change depending on the placement:

“antigua casa” “former house”

“casa antigua” “old house”

“un gran hombre” “a great man”

“un hombre grande” “a large man.”

The stressed form of the adjective is more common in Spanish than in English:
“un libro mío” “a book of mine” (more common: “my book”)
“la amiga suya” “the friend of hers” (more common: “her friend”).

E. COGNATES.

fc = false cognate pc = partial cognate (be careful)

pfc = partial false cognate (be very careful)

ABANDONAR (pfc) ≠ to give up something completely
= to leave temporarily: “el presidente abandonó el salón.”

ACTA (fc) ≠ act.

= formal written minutes of a meeting:

“leyó el acta de la reunión.”

Note: for English “act” in sense of “law,” instead use “ley”:

“Ley Taft-Hartley.”

ACTUAL (fc) ≠ actual or real.

= current, present: “mi hogar actual está aquí en Washington.”

ADICTO (pc) = addicted to a vice.

Also = partisan or follower: “soy adicto de Menem.”

ADMITIR (pfc) = to admit that something is true.

≠ permit entrance to a show; instead use “dar entrada.”

ADVERTENCIA (fc) ≠ advertisement; instead use “anuncio.”

= warning.

F. PROVERBS AND IDIOMS.

A caballo regalado no se le mira el diente.

Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

A Dios rogando y con el mazo dando.

Put your faith in God and keep your powder dry.

A duras penas With great difficulty.

A escondidas Without the knowledge of; secretly; under the table.

A grandes rasgos Briefly; in outline.

A la americana Dutch treat.

A la carrera On the run.

A lo largo de Bordering; along the length of.

LESSON 3

A. HISTORY OF TRANSLATION.

Early Bible translation and St Jerome.

The Old and New Testaments represent the greatest single translation project in the history of civilization. To this day there are dedicated linguistic-religious missionaries who are devoting their professional lives to understanding the intricacies of obscure tribal languages which have no written form, with the goal of providing the tribes with the Bible as their first text.

The challenge of translating the Bible from its original Hebrew and other Semitic languages has always been a delicate one because of the religious sensitivities towards modifying the Word of God in any way. But if the challenge were not accepted, then that Word would remain inaccessible to the vast majority of converts. Thus, the challenge had to be accepted, even at some risk to the translators, many of whom endured charges of blasphemy for their efforts. More than one Bible translator was burned at the stake for a supposedly distorted translation of God's words.

Because of the heavy emphasis on God's exact words as the basis for the Bible, many early translators understandably leaned towards an excessively literal translation. That is, they translated word for word in an attempt to avoid any accusation that they were changing the Word of God. While this might have been the safer course, it frequently resulted in losing much of the meaning of the original text. As we shall see in the various theoretical sections which follow dealing with "surface versus deep meaning," this is a dilemma that plagues all translators, although it has been especially troublesome in Bible translations.

The earliest systematic translation of the Old Testament was made for the extensive Greek-speaking Jewish communities in places such as Alexandria (Egypt) and the Mediterranean generally, several centuries before the birth of Christ. As Christianity spread through that same area and the remote reaches of the Roman Empire, there was an increasing demand for translation of the New Testament into a variety of languages, beginning with Latin, but also including Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Gothic, Georgian and Armenian. There was little control over many of these translations, which frequently were so literal that although they might have preserved the Word of God, they did little to meet the basic purpose of making that Word available in these other languages.

And so it came to pass that in the year 384 A.D. Pope Damasus ordered the scholar Jerome (Eusebius Hieronymus in the Latin version of his name) to begin a fresh translation of the New Testament. Although Jerome was certainly not the first, or even the best, translator of the Bible, he was the first translator who left us with a detailed and analytical written record of the mental process he went through as he translated. He was in a sense the first person to lay out a “theory of translation” and to explicitly address the eternal dilemma of the translator: Do I translate words or do I translate meaning? He approached his immense task in a systematic and disciplined way, examining the many existing translated versions of the Bible, and deciding that he had to go back to the original Hebrew and Aramaic texts in order to determine the original meaning. His solution to the translator’s dilemma was to translate “non verbum e verbo sed sensum exprimere de sensu” (“sense for sense, and not word for word”).¹¹ He also wrote his Vulgate Bible in a Latin style which would be understood by the average educated Christian of his day, and not the more elevated formal style of a classical writer or a theologian. His approach, and his clear statement of it, were courageous, and brought upon his head a storm of controversy which lasted all his career.

St Jerome’s analytical approach, his willingness to be subjective, and his courage to understand and convey the deeper meaning of what he was translating have earned him the nickname of “patron saint of translators.” His admonition to translate the sense of the text, and not the literal word, is a basic guideline for every translator since his day.

B. TRANSLATION TIDBIT.

From a letter written by the American diplomat Bayard Taylor commenting on the language qualifications of President Lincoln’s (later Johnson’s) minister to Russia from 1861 to 1869:¹²

“Ignorance of any European language, I knew, was a necessary qualification, with our Government, for a diplomatic post. I have now learned that ignorance of English is still more necessary.”

C. THEORY OF TRANSLATION

Surface vs deep meaning.

A basic theoretical concept with a great deal of applicability to translation practice is the notion of surface (external) versus deep (internal) meaning. A number of specialists have addressed this idea in a variety of ways, each of which will help us understand the difference between the surface structures of a message and the deeper meaning.

Larson, for example, bases her whole approach on what she calls “meaning-based