

Translation Considerations: New Testament Greek to English

Advanced Greek– [LTSG](#) – mgvhoffman (2010.05)

When translating New Testament Greek into English, we sometimes are seeking simply to confirm the accuracy of an existing English version. Sometimes we can look at the Greek and produce a translation in our mind that reflects our understanding of the text. In the considerations that follow, however, I am trying to note the kinds of things we should be thinking about if we are actually trying to produce a share-able translation. That is, we are trying to produce a translation that is faithful to the original Greek text, will stand independently from our explanation of it, and will communicate effectively to its readers. (A single person can certainly attempt such a translation, but I am assuming that a group will produce a better translation.)

1. What is your audience?
 - How old are the readers?
 - Is English the native language?
 - Where will the translation be used?
 - Is this translation intended to be spoken out loud or read to one's self?
2. Depending on audience, what difference will it make?
 - Vocabulary
 - Especially be aware of the use of theological terms.
 - Dialect: Watch for terms with special or distinct meanings in various English dialects. E.g., British, American [southern/northern!], Australian...
 - Connotations: Even word-for-word translations must be aware of connotations of a word. E.g., the difference between “to party” and “to celebrate.”
 - Are there are any key terms or special vocabulary in the passage at hand? Are these words/concepts favorites of this author or unusual occurrences?
 - Sentence length and structure (Remember that more readable English uses shorter sentences with preference for active voice constructions.)
 - Reading level
 - Use of idioms (Try using a Google word or phrase search to determine if something is ‘biblisch’ or not.)
 - Is there a ‘traditional’ reading of the text you want to echo (or go against)?
 - Performance: I.e., will the text be read aloud or read silently to one's self?
 - Clarity (I.e., will the reader fully understand or do you need to add explanatory notes?)
3. Where on the scale of literal / formal / word-for-word to dynamic / functional / thought-for-thought do you intend your translation to fall? (Or are you aiming for something more akin to a discourse-level translation or even a paraphrase?)
 - As you translate, think of how you are translating on various levels: words, phrases, sentences, conceptual units, pericopes, the full containing unit (i.e.,

book, letter, etc.), the author's full body of works, ancient Greek literature in general.

- To what extent do you imitate the style of the Greek? (E.g., the Greek in the Gospel of Mark is very different from that of Luke or of Hebrews.) Does your translation reflect such differences? If the style is basically paratactic (sentences joined by and/or) or hypertactic (longer sentences with subordinate clauses), do you try to match it?
- To what degree do you match the form of the original? (I.e., if the Greek is part of a hymn or poetry, do you render it so in English?)
- Greek often likes to work with chiasmic structures. How will you replicate the external 'frames' and the point of emphasis in the middle?
- How will you lay out the text? By verse? Sentence? Paragraph?
- How do you handle text critical issues in the Greek text?
- How much of the Greek word order do you want to imitate? Remember that verb-subject-object is the 'default' order in Greek. If something other than the verb is the first element in a sentence, is it there simply for background or for emphasis?
- How do you handle related Greek words that occur in the passage at hand? (I.e., words that have the same root.)
- How do you treat word plays in the Greek?
- How will you handle obscure or culturally-bound terms? (E.g., units of measurement, coinage, social status identifiers...)
- How will you treat Greek grammatical idioms? (E.g., ἀπεκρίθη καὶ εἶπεν; ἰδοὺ; καὶ ἐγένετο...)
- Is the text quoting Scripture? How will you indicate this?
- How will you handle inclusive language issues?
 - What pronouns do you use for God or the Holy Spirit?
 - If the text uses a form of ἀνὴρ or ἀδελφός (as compared to a form of ἄνθρωπος), will you use "man" or "brother" even in situations where the context appears to include both men and women?
 - Do you want to use "him/her" as a form or alternate pronoun genders? Are you willing to change singular references [where you need to choose between him/her] to plurals [where you can use they/them]? Are you willing to mix number? Are you willing to switch to 2nd person? Do you try to avoid it altogether by using a circumlocution or an idiom?
Examples: "He who has ears, let him hear." or "He who has ears, let her hear." or "One who has ears, let them hear." or "They who have ears, let them hear." or "You who have ears, listen carefully." or "Everyone who has ears should listen carefully." or simply "Pay attention!"
- How will you work with the tense and mood of verbs? (I.e., will you always treat presents as progressives? What about instances where grammarians suggest things like 'perfective presents' or 'inceptive aorists'?) How will you deal with instances of the "Historic Present"?

- Check for participles and the range of translation that is possible. Will you render circumstantial participles ‘vaguely’ (e.g., simply using a gerund form), or will you try to specify a circumstance?
- Pay attention to connective particles (e.g., καὶ, δὲ, γὰρ, ἀλλὰ, οὕτως, τότε, οὖν, τε καὶ, ὅτι, μὲν... δέ,)? Have you accurately reflected their discursive or logical intentions?¹
- How will handle special uses of the cases of nouns, pronouns, substantives...? In particular, how do you handle the genitive case? Will you simply use “of” or try to be more specific?
- If the text is a question, note whether the Greek uses an indicative or subjunctive mood verb. Will your translation distinguish between those kinds of questions?
- If the text is a negative question, does the Greek introduce it with an οὐ or a μή?
- If there is a conditional clause, what type of condition is it? (Simple, future general, present general, contrary-to-fact) What are the implications, and how will you express them in English?
- If there is a command, note the tense and force of the Greek imperative. How will you express it in English?

After you have finished a draft of your translation, review it with these considerations in mind.

1. If someone would try to translate your text back into Greek, would it have any resemblance to the original Greek?
2. Have you been as consistent as possible in your tone and style?
3. Read the text out loud? How does it sound? Can it be read aloud easily?
4. Close your eyes and have someone read the text to you. How does it sound? Are there possible errors in hearing it correctly?
5. Consider having someone for whom English is not the first language (or does not share your ethnic/dialectical English background) look at the text. Is it clear? Have you used any confusing idioms?
6. Is it aesthetically satisfactory?
7. What does your text look like? (I.e., does the layout complement the text?)
8. Check the text’s reading level. (Search on “readability” in MSWord Help to learn how to determine approximate grade level.) Is it appropriate?
9. Have you embedded theological or cultural biases in the translation that you did not consciously intend?
10. Solicit feedback on the translation from those in your intended audience. Did it make sense? Did it sound natural? Was it clear?

¹ Levinsohn (<http://www.sil.org/siljot/abstract.asp?id=48005>) provides an excellent example of the type of thing for which to watch. In Luke 2.18-19, the NRSV states that “all who heard it were amazed... But Mary treasured all these words...” In English, this sounds as if Mary was not amazed. The Greek, however, uses δέ to indicate a contrasting or extending circumstance rather than an opposing position.