

Relevance theory and translation: Toward a new realism in Bible translation

(Prepub-DRAFT)

(Ernst-August Gutt; paper presented at the 2004 *International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature*, 25.-28.7.2004, Groningen, Netherlands.)

1. Introduction: High goals of Bible translation

Due to its central significance for the Christian faith, Bible translation tends to be subject to very stringent demands on quality. These demands focus on two major areas: a) accuracy in meaning and b) ease of understanding. They are reflected in the prefaces to many contemporary Scripture translations, expressing their commitment to meeting them, as much as language differences and human error allow. The following excerpt from the preface of the Contemporary English Version may serve to illustrate this:

"In the *Contemporary English Version* every word, phrase, and clause of the original was carefully studied by the translators. Then, with equal care, they tried to find the best way to translate the verse so it could be easily read and understood. As a result, the form is very different, but the meaning is both *accurate* and *clear*." (CEV 1991:ii)

Other modern versions make very similar claims, as can be seen from the appendix below.

Laudable and understandable as these high claims are, this paper will argue that they show a serious lack in realism, arising from an inadequate understanding of the cognitive processes involved in human communication. Much new light has been shed on these processes over the last two decades by research into the inferential nature of communication, especially by relevance theorists.

2. Meaning arises from language and thought

So what do we have to understand about communication to become more realistic in Bible translation? Considering that communication consists in the sharing of thoughts with others, it faces two major obstacles:

- 1) Thoughts are not public, cannot be perceived by others. To share them, something perceptible is needed, called ***ostensive stimulus*** in relevance theory.
- 2) The most sophisticated ostensive stimuli available are verbal expressions (utterances, texts), but even they do not, by themselves, give direct access to thoughts, do not "encode" the thoughts. Even verbal expressions only provide ***evidence*** from which the thoughts themselves need to be ***inferred***.

The contribution of language ("radical underdeterminacy hypothesis")

Consider the following text:


“The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange the items in different groups. Of course one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step; otherwise you are pretty well set.”

What do you make of this text? It probably does not make much sense. Now let me tell you that the heading is "Washing clothes". I suppose you will agree that this little clue makes the text quite intelligible - without any change to its wording.

This example is one of many psychological experiments that have shown that the meaning of a text is not in the words (Bransford and Johnson 1972; cited in Hirsch 1987). Over the last three or so decades, there has been a remarkable convergence in different disciplines concerned with communication on the insight that the words of a text are but pointers toward its intended meaning. Thus in the field of education, E.D. Hirsch stated that: “To grasp the words on a page we have to know *a lot of information that isn't set down on the page*” (1987:3 italics my own). Hirsch powerfully illustrated the proportion between what is explicitly stated and what is implied in a text by the analogy of an **iceberg**:

A powerful analogy

- “The explicit meanings of a piece of writing are **the tip of an iceberg of meaning**:
- the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader’s own relevant knowledge.”
(Hirsch 1987:33-34)



“The explicit meanings of a piece of writing are the tip of an iceberg of meaning: the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader’s own relevant knowledge.” (1987:33-34). In relevance theory, this has become known as the hypothesis of the "radical underdeterminacy of linguistic meaning" (Carston 2002).

The importance of the cognitive environment

Where then does the additional meaning/information come from? Hirsch suggested that it stems from "the reader's own relevant knowledge" (1987:33-34), relevance theory states more precisely that it comes from the "**cognitive**

environment" of the reader. The total cognitive environment of a person consists of all the information accessible to him/her at the time, either from perception, memory, or by inference (adapted from Sperber and Wilson 1995:39).

However, for the comprehension of a particular utterance or text, not all of this vast amount of information is used, but only a **subset** of it. This subset of information is called the **context of the utterance**.¹ In our example, it is what one knows about the process of washing clothes. Note that both cognitive environment and context are essentially psychological concepts.

Why is it that human beings access information in their cognitive environment at all? Why do they not just deal with what is said or written?

The answer is that one of the basic characteristic of human beings is the need to relate new information to what they already know: only then does this information make sense to them. This tendency is at work not only in communication but is believed to be a dominating feature of human cognition in general.

The heuristic of comprehension

In relevance theory, this urge for relating new information to what one already knows is known as the search for **relevance**. For information to be experienced as relevant, it must link up in one of several specific ways with information one already has. When such link-ups take place, people experience them as "**cognitive effects**". These link-ups are always the result of inferential thought processes. As an example, let us look at **contextual implication** as one particular type of cognitive effect..

Here is a conversational exchange between mother and daughter:

- a) *Mother*. What's your new teacher like?
- b) *Daughter*. He rides to school on a motorbike.

¹ Note that relevance theory is not interested in categorising this information according to its sources, e.g. whether it came from the preceding utterances (co-text), from other literature or the culture in general, from something one can see in one's surroundings etc. Such classifications may be interesting from a descriptive point of view, but they do not matter for comprehension. All that matters for comprehension is its accessibility, not its original source.

Contextual implications (1)

a) *Mother*: What's your new teacher like?

b) *Daughter*: He rides to school on a motorbike.

The daughter finds men cool who ride motorbikes.

Answer: She likes the teacher.

Reason: She likes him because he rides a motorbike.

In this brief exchange, the daughter's response does not answer her mother's question directly: the mother asked about the daughter's opinion of the new teacher; the daughter talks about how he gets to school. Yet, they are not talking past each other.

Suppose the mother knows that the daughter finds men cool who ride motorbikes. In that case, it is quite clear that the daughter's answer to the question is a) that she does like the teacher and b) also the reason why because he rides a motorbike.

How can we explain that understanding? It is certainly not expressed in the linguistic forms.

As we said earlier, our mind tries to make sense of things, looking for relevance by trying to establish **inferential links** between different pieces of information. Presented in more detail, in our example the following process of inference takes place. (cover parts)

Contextual implications (2)

↓ Contents expressed

- *Premise 1*: The new teacher rides to school on a motorbike.
- *Premise 2*: The daughter likes men who ride motorbikes.

↑ Contextual assumption

■ *Conclusion*: The daughter likes the new teacher.

↑ Contextual implication

Benefits!

What the daughter actually expressed was that the new teacher rides a motorbike to school. Let's take this to be premise 1. The information that she likes men who ride motorbikes would then be premise 2. Taken together, these two premises logically imply the conclusion:
The daughter likes the new teacher.

It is this logical relatedness that makes us feel that the daughter's answer is relevant, "makes sense": it leads to a logical conclusion – or, in relevance-theoretic terminology, to a **contextual implication** (uncover), an implication which logically follows from the contents expressed (uncover) (premise 1) and a contextual assumption, drawn from the cognitive environment shared between mother and daughter.

Other cognitive effects identified so far are contextual strengthening, contextual deletion, and possibly contextual weakening. What is important, is that **all cognitive effects have in common is that they are experienced by us as cognitively rewarding**: relevant information is beneficial. And it is the search for these **benefits** that makes our minds work!

But, inferring, or more generally, thinking, is not for free; it is work that costs **effort**. Thus we get mentally tired when we try to understand a complicated text, or also when we have to dig deep into memory to find some piece of information. We may often regret that thinking involves effort, but this cost factor is, in fact, crucial for human communication to work: the basic secret of the success of communication lies in the exploitation of the balance between benefits and efforts, between cost and effect, in the following way (adapted from (Sperber and Wilson 2002):

The heuristic of comprehension

The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

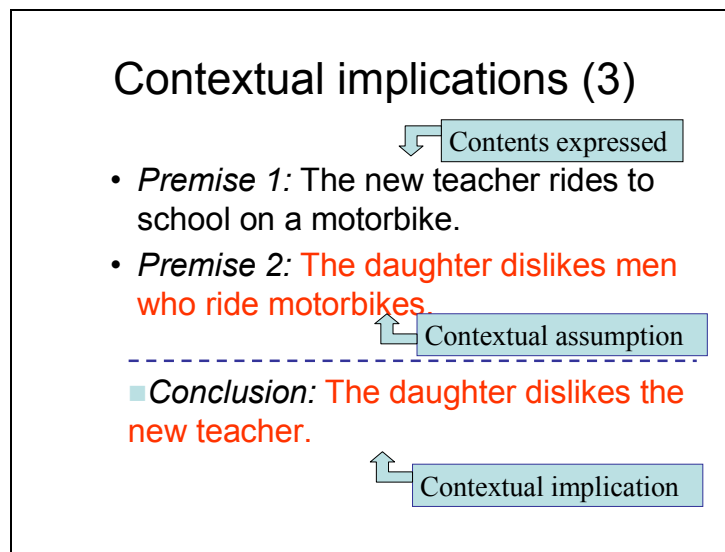
- follow a path of least effort in search of cognitive effects.
- stop when expectations of relevance are satisfied and assume that you have arrived at the intended meaning.

[Adapted from Sperber and Wilson 2002, 'Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading']

This balance of adequate cognitive effects without unnecessary effort is called **optimal relevance**.

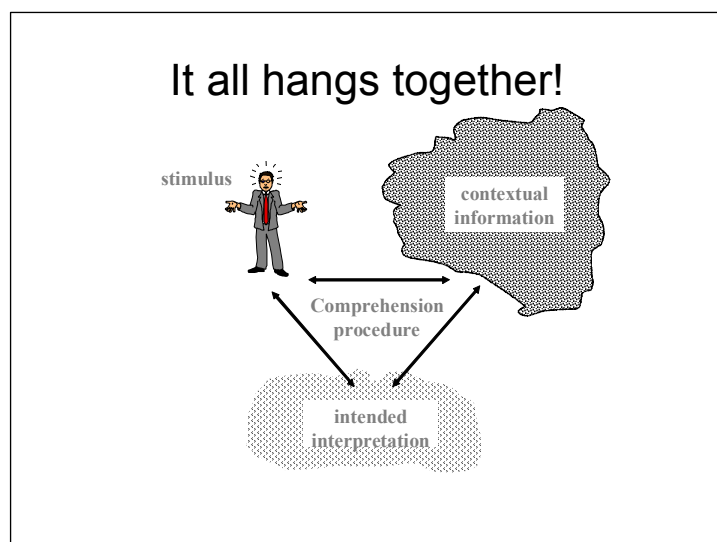
2.4 It all hangs together by cause & effect

This relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure explains why the readers' cognitive environment - or "context" - is so important for the success or failure of communication: it is the nature of that cognitive environment that determines the path of least effort : what thoughts are used in the comprehension process and what meaning gets inferred. Returning to the motorbike example, suppose the daughter actually disliked men riding motorbikes, considering them macho. In this different cognitive environment, the very same utterance would convey a very different meaning: that she disliked the new teacher.



Thus although the words used would be exactly the same, they would lead to the opposite meaning, because the path of comprehension would go through a rather different cognitive environment.

Thus the way the cognitive comprehension procedure works, it establishes a **causal interdependence relationship** between the **text**, the contextual information accessible in the **cognitive environment** and the **intended interpretation**. A change in any one of these three factors will affect the other factors.



3. Secondary communication situations

One of the consequences of this cause-effect interdependence is that not just **any** meaning (interpretation) can be communicated in **any** cognitive environment, but that the cognitive environment constrains what can or cannot be communicated in a given instance. In effect, the cognitive comprehension procedure constitutes a **communicability condition** on **all** human communication, including translation.

Suppose your car has broken down on the road in the middle of nowhere. Another car stops and the people - we shall refer to them as "audience 1" - ask you what the matter is. Suppose you have some background in car mechanics and have tentatively diagnosed the problem as a vapour lock. So you tell them:

(1) "It's a vapour lock."²

If audience 1 know enough about cars and vapour locks, they would have a fairly good idea of what you meant, including the following thoughts:

- 1 The problem with the car is a vapour lock
 - 2 The engine does not get fuel.
 - 3 The fuel line has got so hot in one place that the fuel has evaporated.

 - 4 Blowing hard into the fuel tank can unblock the line.
 - 5 The car has broken down.
 - 6 The car needs to be repaired.
- Etc.

Table 1

Graphically, we might show this like in Figure 1 below.

² Example adapted from Headland 1982 .

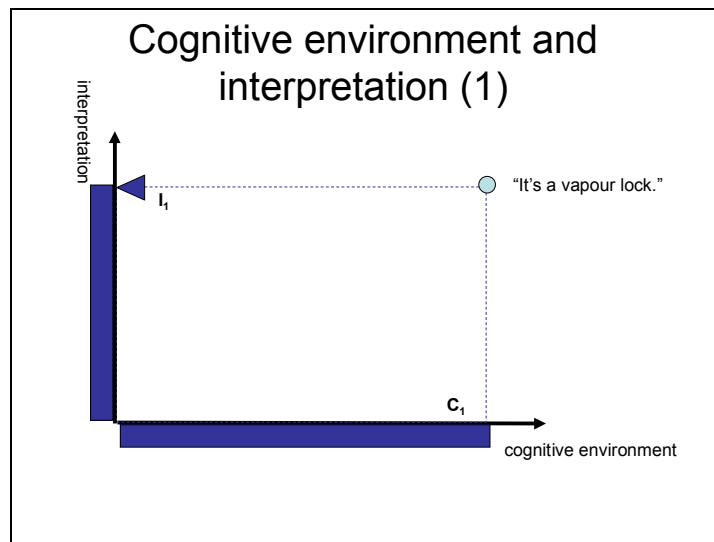


Figure 1

The horizontal axis in this diagram shows the information available in the cognitive environment of audience 1 which it can use as context for the utterance, marked here by C_1 , and the vertical axis the interpretation communicated by the utterance against this cognitive environment, marked as I_1 .

But suppose another car stops and the people in it, let us call them "audience 2", have no idea about vapour locks. If you used utterance (1) for them, they would not really understand its intended meaning. All they could probably gather from your utterance would be the very general implicatures in lines 5 and 6 of Table 1, shown here in Table 2:

- 1 The car has broken down.
- 2 The car needs to be repaired.

Table 2

The reason for this reduced understanding lies in the fact that audience 2 has much less information in its cognitive environment that it can use as context.

Figure 2 shows this situation graphically:

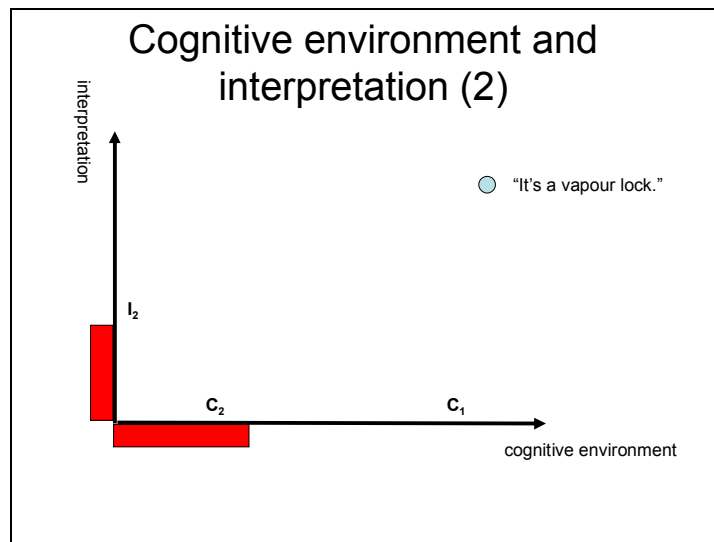


Figure 2

(C_2 = amount of information available as context in the cognitive environment of audience 2; I_2 = interpretation derivable by audience 2 using C_2 .)

Instances where the actual cognitive environment of the audience does not contain all the information needed to interpret an utterance have been called **secondary communication situations**, and such situations typically cause communication problems (Gutt 2000:76).

In point of fact, for audience (2) utterance (1) would not have been optimally relevant. They would be puzzled by the term "vapour lock", and would lack any information that would relate to it. For their cognitive environment it would have been much better to simply tell them (utterance 2):

(2) "It's broken down."

This would have given them the same meaning (I_2) as the other utterance, without making them puzzle about what a "vapour lock" might be. In relevance-theoretic terms, (2) would have been more relevant to this audience, leading them to the same interpretation without unnecessary processing effort.

One crucial point, though, that is often overlooked, is that while utterance (2) is more relevant (in the technical sense) to audience (2) than utterance (1), it also does **convey less information** to them than utterance (1) communicated to audience 1 (Table 3):

1 The problem with the car is a vapour lock	1 The car has broken down.
2 The engine does not get fuel.	2 The car needs to be repaired. Etc.
3 The fuel line has got so hot in one place that the fuel has evaporated.	
4 Blowing hard into the fuel tank can unblock the line.	
5 The car has broken down.	
6 The car needs to be repaired. Etc.	

Figure 3 shows this in diagram form.

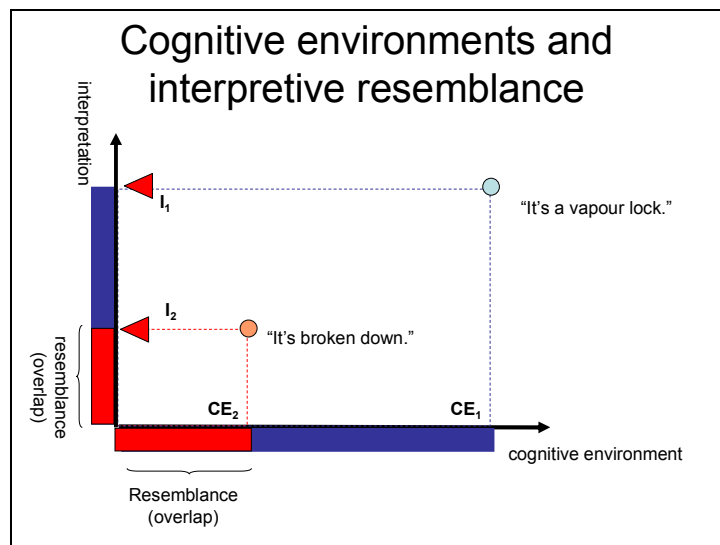


Figure 3

Since the cognitive environment audience 2 overlaps only with a small part of that of audience 1, the interpretation audience 2 is able to derive also overlaps only with a small part of the interpretation obtained by audience 1. Put in different words: the **interpretations** of these two utterances **differ** from each other because the **cognitive environments** of the two audiences **differ** from each other.

In fact, there is a **correlation** between the degree of **resemblance between the cognitive environments of two audiences** and the degree of

resemblance in interpretations that can be communicated to them, as Figure 4 shows:

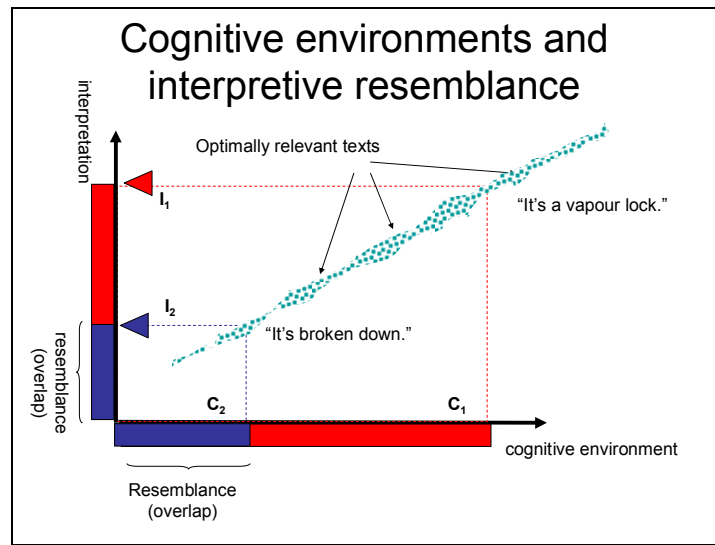


Figure 4

The higher the resemblance between the cognitive environments of the two audience is, the higher the resemblance between the information that can be communicated to them will be. Conversely, the less the cognitive environments of the two audiences resemble each other, the less the interpretation that can be communicated to them will resemble each other.

4. Secondary communication situations in Bible translation

Returning to Bible translation, it is obvious that in many cases the cognitive environment of the target language audience shows very little resemblance to that of the original audience. Let us look at the following translated passage:

A biblical example

“How terrible it will be for you, Chorazin! How terrible for you too, Bethsaida! If the miracles which were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, the people there would have long ago sat down, put on sackcloth, and sprinkled ashes on themselves, to show that they had turned from their sins! 14 God will show more mercy on the Judgment Day to Tyre and Sidon than to you.”

(Lk 10:13-14; TEV)

Details aside, the main points of this passage seem to be that Jesus pronounces "woes" over Chorazin and Bethsaida and gives the reason for this: the God's severe judgment of their failure to follow Jesus' call to repentance. Note, however, that this reasoning is largely implicit. For example, the text does not state at all that a) Jesus had called the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida to repentance and b) that they had failed to follow that call. To understand this, a very considerable amount of information from the cognitive environment has to be accessed, including the following:³

Information from cognitive environment:

- Chorazin and Bethsaida were towns in Galilee inhabited by Jews.
- Tyre and Sidon were Gentile towns singled out repeatedly by OT prophets for severe divine judgment because of their great sinfulness.
- The miracles talked about were done by Jesus as part of his ministry in Chorazin and Bethsaida.
- As another part of his ministry there, he had also called the people to repentance.
- Mighty works were seen as divine authentications of spiritual ministry.
- Thus the miracles Jesus did in Chorazin and Bethsaida had authenticated his divine authority.
- In spite of this divine authentication, the Jews living in these towns had not followed Jesus' call to repentance.
- Since Jesus' miracles would have moved the notoriously sinful Gentiles of Tyre and Sidon to repentance, the Jews in Chorazin and Bethsaida were much worse than those Gentiles.

The original writer did not supply any of this information, evidently assuming it to be highly accessible in the cognitive environment of his readers.

"Biblically illiterate" readers of this text today, however, would lack virtually all of this background information and therefore this text would be quite unclear to them, raising many questions, including the following:

Questions for modern readers:

- What are Chorazin and Bethsaida?
- What will be terrible to them?
- What are 'the miracles'?
- Who did them?
- What have miracles got to do with repenting of sins?
- What are Tyre and Sidon?
- Why are they mentioned here?
- What is "the Judgment Day"?
- Why are Tyre and Sidon mentioned at all – it's a **counterfactual** point: the people of Tyre and Sidon did not see those mighty deeds and did not repent?

³ Re Tyre and Sidon: "The two cities represent the pagan world, and Tyre especially was regarded as subject to divine judgment (Am. 1:9f.; Is. 23:1-18; Jer. 25:22; 47:4; Ezk. 26-28)." Marshall 1978 :

...

Without this information the passage would not really make sense to them. They would be in a situation similar to that of the test persons of the clothes-washing text - with one big difference: with the clothes-washing text, the readers actually had the necessary information in their cognitive environment; it just was not accessible enough to be used as context for the utterance. Just supplying a 2-word heading fixed the problem. For biblically illiterate readers of this short passage from Luke, the problem is much more substantial: they don't just lack the right clue to access the necessary information in their cognitive environment - this information is not actually part of their cognitive environment at all.

The detrimental effect of differences in cognitive environments on the comprehension of Bible translations has recently been empirically investigated by Harriet Hill (2002; 2004). As part of her Ph.D. research, Hill (2004) measured the effect of differences in cognitive environment on the comprehension of translated biblical texts. In 270 interviews she assessed the comprehension of four passages from a translation of the New Testament into the Adioukrou language of Ivory Coast. The results were surprising: although the translation had been done in accordance with the modern principles of meaning-oriented translation, the comprehension rate turned out to be quite low: on average, the test persons comprehended less than a third of the informational content of the original (28.2 % Hill 2004:13) However, when the audience's cognitive environment was adjusted by the provision of relevant background information, their comprehension level doubled to around 60 % (Hill 2004:13).

5. Significance for Bible translation

What is the significance of these insights for the enterprise of Bible translation?

One of the most surprising facts about modern Bible translation is that this major barrier to successful comprehension is given very little attention. If the prefaces to Bible translations are anything to go by, the primary issues addressed are those of language. Translators and publishers tend to emphasize that, in line with modern translation theory, the translation employs the natural structures and idiom of the target language, that uncommon expressions have been replaced by contemporary ones, etc. It is then claimed that, because of these linguistic adjustments, the meaning of the original is now easy to understand for the modern reader. The fact that differences in background knowledge are likely to cause major comprehension problems for the modern reader are rarely mentioned.

This practice is unhelpful, to say the very least. It creates the misleading impression that the linguistic adjustments now give easy access to the accurate meaning of the text. It does not usually take long before readers find these promises broken because of significant differences in their cognitive environment. Prefaces to Bible translations should do everything possible to prepare readers for this experience; they should come with a "health warning"

about the comprehension problems modern readers are certain to encounter due to differences in background knowledge.

Such "health warnings" will not only save the readers the experience of unexpected frustration with seemingly obscure texts. They are also important, to alert them to the possibility that even seemingly clear texts may actually have quite a different meaning, due to differences in background knowledge. This possibility of misunderstanding is, in some ways, more serious than that of obscurity, since obscurity will be noticed, but misinterpretations often go unrecognized.

There are two obvious caveats here. First, such health warnings must be worded appropriately, not to scare the reader off altogether. They should make clear that there are also many texts in the Bible that readers will have no great difficulty of understanding because of sufficient overlap with the relevant parts of the original cognitive environment. Indeed, it would be helpful if the reader were directed to such texts as starting points for their reading.

Secondly, while health warnings alert readers to problems they are likely to meet, they do not solve those problems. So the much more demanding challenge is that of developing effective solutions.

6. The need for biblical literacy

What solutions are available? In principle, the basic task is clear: to meet the communicability condition, secondary communication situations have to be transformed into primary ones, where the utterance can achieve adequate contextual effects in the cognitive environment of the audience, without unnecessary processing cost.

Since there are two major factors involved - the interpretation and the cognitive environment - there are, in principle, two ways of solving the problem:

1) one can **adjust the interpretation** - and hence the utterance - so that it does achieve adequate contextual effects in the **existing cognitive environment**.

2) one can **adjust the cognitive environment** until the **originally intended interpretation** does lead to adequate contextual effects.

Our vapour-lock example illustrated solution (1): it accepted that the cognitive environment of audience (2) as given, and adjusted the meaning to be communicated accordingly. It therefore settled for an interpretation that only **partially resembled the original interpretation**, sharing only some implicatures with it (Figure 5):

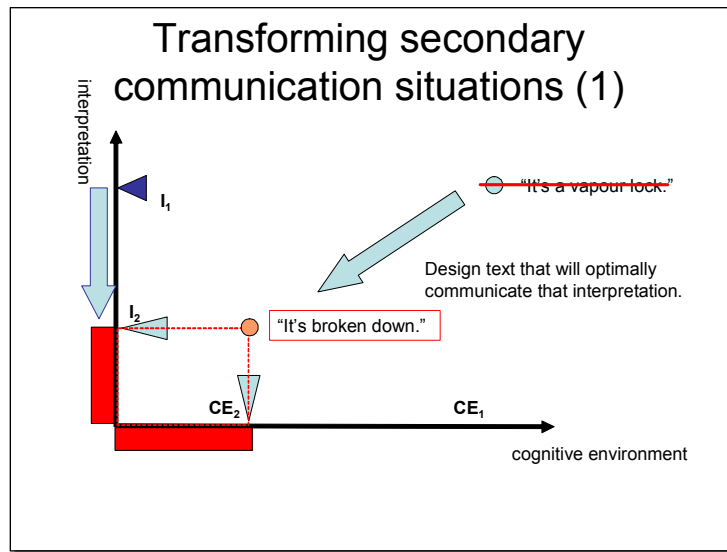


Figure 5

Option 2) would have been to tell the audience that the fuel which the engine needs to run is sucked from the tank via a thin pipe, the fuel line. It can happen that some part of the fuel line gets very hot, making the petrol evaporate and thereby interrupting the petrol supply to the engine. This condition is called a "vapour lock". After this explanation, utterance (1) "It's got a vapour lock" could have been successfully used.

Thus, you would have **adjusted the cognitive environment of the audience** to a point where the original interpretation could lead to adequate contextual effects and hence be comprehended successfully (Figure 6):

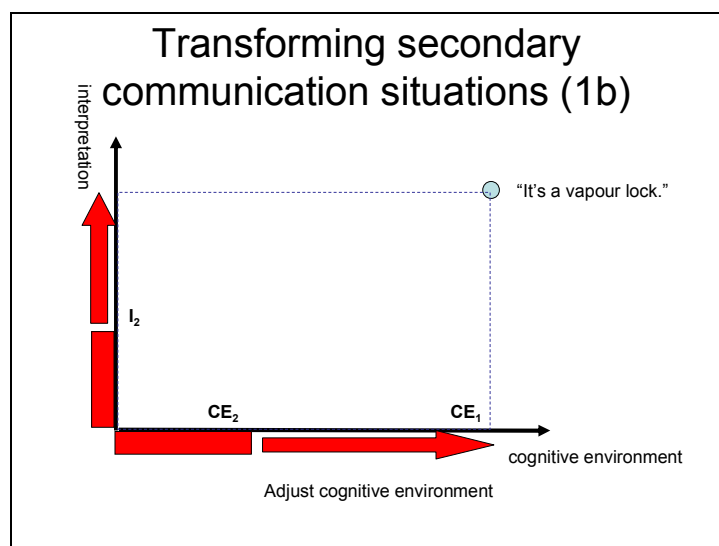


Figure 6

What would have been **impossible**, however, is communicating the **full meaning of the original** in the **unadjusted cognitive environment** of audience 2 (Figure 7):

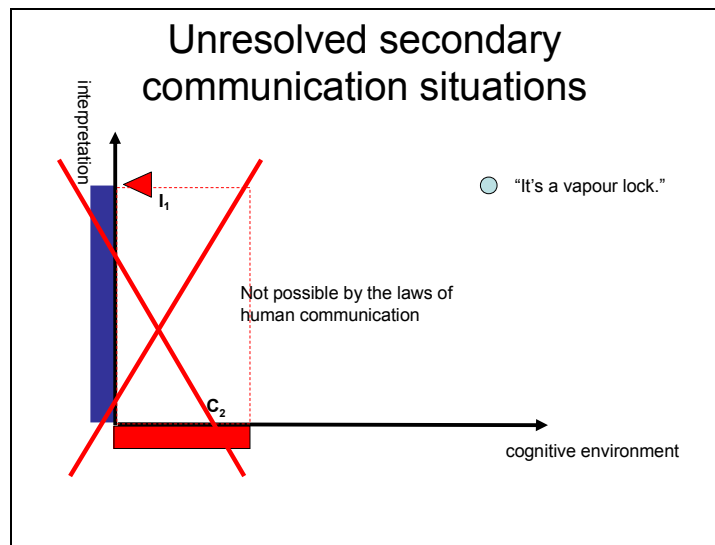


Figure 7

Option 1, adjusting the information to be communicated to the current cognitive environment of the target audience, is not usually considered acceptable for Bible translation, though it does occur, often under the label of "paraphrase". A recent interesting example is Rob Lacey's "Street Bible" (2003).

As far as option 2 is concerned, traditionally, the following means have been used to adjust the cognitive environment of the readers: introductions to biblical books, footnotes, cross references, pictures in the text, glossaries, historical charts of various kinds, "profiles" of biblical characters, to name some of the most common ones.

While all these helps are certainly useful, it must be frankly admitted that, compared to the gaps in background knowledge that need to be bridged, their scope is very limited. For example, of the four versions referred to on the handout, only the Contemporary English Version provides any explanatory information to our sample passage, and that information concerns only the custom of dressing in sackcloth and putting ashes on one's head.⁴ None of the other information essential for making sense of this passage is provided.⁵

What, then, are more effective ways of ensuring that Bible translations can be comprehended more successfully?

⁴ "dressed in sackcloth ... ashes on their heads: This was one way that people showed how sorry they were for their sins" CEV 1991:117

⁵ This is, of course, partly due to physical and/or economic constraints: a book already as voluminous as the Bible can only accommodate so much more information. However, one wonders whether another, more influential reason is a lack of awareness of the real extent of the background information that is often required.

As I pointed out as early as 1988, for a realistic solution, Bible translation must be seen not as a stand-alone but as an integrated part of a much wider and more comprehensive strategy of biblical communication (Gutt 1988). This wider strategy must include as one of its key goals the establishment of "biblical literacy" - in the sense of the background knowledge necessary to understand its meaning, in analogy to the concept of "cultural literacy" proposed by E.D. Hirsch.

There are indications that this new realism has got a foothold in the context of missionary outreach into certain areas of the Two-Thirds World. Thus the chronological Bible storying (CBS) approach essentially consists of a carefully selected sequence of texts from the Old Testament, designed to build-up the background information necessary to understand the gospel events. (Cf. e.g. Brown (2003)). R. Hill (2004) provides a very helpful survey of various strategies available for adjusting the cognitive environment of Bible readers. It seems, however, that there is still a long way to go until it is generally recognised that an adequate understanding of the Bible requires not only communicative translations, but biblical literacy, in the sense defined here.

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7. Appendix

TEV

"The primary concern of the translators has been to provide a faithful translation of the meaning of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. Their first task was to understand correctly the meaning of the original. ... the translators' next task was to express that meaning in a manner and form easily understood by the readers." (vii/viii *New Life: Good News Bible with colour features*; Glasgow: Collins 1987.)

NIV

Goals of the translation: "... that it would be an accurate translation and one that would have clarity and literary quality and so prove suitable for public and private reading, teaching, preaching, memorising and liturgical use." (vi, *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978.)

New Living Translation:

"The goal of any Bible translation is to convey the meaning of the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts as accurately as possible to the modern reader. The New Living Translation is based on the most recent scholarship in the theory of translation. The challenge for the translators was to create a text that would make the same impact in the life of modern readers that the original text had for the original readers. In the New Living Translation, this is accomplished by translating entire thoughts (rather than just words) into natural, everyday English. The end result is a translation that is easy to read and understand and that accurately communicates the meaning of the original text." (4, *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*. Easy to understand; relevant to today. Text and product preview. Wheaton: Tyndale House 1996.)