

Bible and Cultures:  
Intercultural Dialogue in the Process of the Translation of the Bible  
by Elsa Tamez

There is an interesting fact, the word of God comes to us through translations. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, but we read his words and about his life in Greek. The people of Israel at one time spoke and read Hebrew and later communicated in Aramaic, but since the 3rd century A.D., in the time of the Ptolemies, the people of the diaspora (Alexandria) were not able to read the Law and the prophets in Hebrew. Later the same thing occurred with the Jewish inhabitants of Syria-Palestine. It was absolutely necessary to translate the Hebrew scripture into Greek. We know that the authors of the New Testament cite the Scriptures mostly in Greek. For centuries, since the officialization of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the Christian people considered Latin as the only or privileged language in the reading and proclamation of the Word. Nevertheless, the Vulgate was a translation of the biblical manuscripts in Hebrew and Greek. And in the same way we can continue speaking of other ancient and very valuable translations.

Being conscious of this fact should not lead us to lament that we don't have the "original" but a translation. On the contrary, from my point of view, there is something very positive in not having it, because generally it is believed that "the original" contains the "ultimate truth." To know that we never possess the ultimate truth of the Word of God makes us

humble readers. This realization, I repeat, is valuable in itself. On the one hand, it is a guarantee that places us in the position of limited human beings who approach God as a mystery. On the other hand, it helps to avoid and combat any fundamentalist tendency which leads to arrogance and authoritarianism. The desire to hold onto a particular Bible, as the only and true word of God, does not take into account that the whole Bible is a translation. Including what we might be able to call with caution the original message, it is still an interpretation of the deeds and the revelation of God, made by inspired persons.

From the point of view of the missionary and of biblical animation, what has to be underscored here is not the fact that we do not have the "truth", — no one has it— but the ultimate preoccupation in the act of translating: to make the Bible understandable to its readers. The translation is done in order that the peoples of a different language from the source language might have access to the message. The Bible, whichever book, takes on life when its content is understandable. We read this in the book of Acts: when it narrates the descent of the Holy Spirit on not a few persons of different cultures and languages (Acts 2:1-13). From the linguistic point of view, what happened was a radical democratic manifestation of pluricultural translation: that is, to understand in one's own language the divine event narrated in another language. The author says: that people of different places and different

languages commented: “are not all those who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that we hear them each one in our native language?... all of us hear in our own language a recounting of the marvels of God" (Pilgrim Bible).

In this presentation I'm going to focus on the intercultural and pluricultural dialogue which takes place in the process of translation, taking into account that the objective is to make the Bible understandable to its target audience. I am going to refer to the translations into indigenous languages (spoken and written languages), and to sign languages, the languages of the deaf community which is visual, chronological, spatial and performative. Finally, being inspired by the myth of the Tower of Babel, I will conclude by underlining the danger of relying on one culture, one language and only one thought.

### *The translation of the Bible: an intercultural activity*

I have dedicated the last 13 years as a consultant for translations of the Bible into indigenous languages and even more into sign language, the language of deaf persons. In all the cases I have observed that the translation is an intercultural activity. Within the theories of translation that is privileged which is concordant<sup>1</sup> with the message; naturally, in the sense that it ought to follow the grammatical norms of the target

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<sup>1</sup> It can be difficult to to define exactly *fidedigna*.

language, so that the message is fluid and understandable; and clear (respecting, certainly, the mysteries which the text itself wishes to retain)<sup>2</sup>.

When we speak of making the Bible understandable, we are thinking of the audience for whom this translation is designed. I have in mind two types of translation: first is that which is done from one language to another, or it may be from biblical languages to other languages. These languages can be spoken (indigenous or dominant languages) or signed, as sign languages. The second type of translation refers to the sociolinguistic perspective, that is to say, the translation of the Bible is done considering the linguistic variations within the same language such as age, cultural and social levels, profession, etc. In Spanish and other languages we have a good number of Bibles of different types. Many persons, when they discover that I am a biblicist ask me which is the better translation of the Bible. I respond: “about what type of audience are you thinking?” Every translation is made in accord with a determined public. For example, for a student in the seminary, who does exegetical work, the translation of the Bible using formal equivalency, such as the Jerusalem Bible or the Reina Valera, is better<sup>3</sup>; for intellectual persons interested in the Bible a more literary translation is more satisfactory (TOB, or Alonso Schöckl or *God Speaks Today*, the

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<sup>2</sup> Following the terminology of E. Nida, dynamic equivalency is privileged over formal equivalency. Cf. *The Theory and Practice of Translation* - (Brill, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> This last with the limitation that the base text is the *recibido* - *textus receptus*- of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

*New International Bible*); for religious and priests, a more liturgical translation; for simple people, it's much better to have a translation into contemporary language such as the *Translation into Today's Language* or the *Word of God for All*.

*a) Translation of the Bible from a written language to another which is spoken/written*

In both cases, whether a translation from one language to another or from different registers of the same language, we are talking about an intercultural translation. Allow me to refer to the first type, that of the translation of the Bible from one language to another as an intercultural activity.

In the process of translating from the source language (languages of the biblical text) to a target language (language of the receivers) there takes place a dialogue between two cultures. The translator is the one who initiates the dialogue, making himself a mediator between the text and those for whom it is destined. Moreover, the mediator is not neutral, she also possesses her own culture. Therefore, we can say that in the exercise of translating there occurs a fascinating intercultural dialogue which takes place among the text, the translators and the recipients. The biblical text exhibits its home culture, its background, perceptible by

means of linguistics signs and of the deeds narrated, which reflect certain markers or cultural paradigms which betray the diverse cultures present in the Scriptures. Within a couple of millennia which the biblical texts span, we find in the Bible cultures such as Egyptian, Hebrew, Persian, Greek and Roman to mention the most important.

The translators, who are the mediators between the source text and the target language of those for whom it is destined, also show their culture. This is observed not only through their language, but also through their body, through the color of skin, their gender, their religious practice, their age, their formation, etc. The translators are living narratives which enter into the intercultural dialogue with the biblical text and leave their imprint, most times unconsciously.

We are talking about an intense dialogue, a negotiation, which takes place in the head of the translators.<sup>4</sup> Mediators of two cultures and bearers of one of them debate passionately about how to re-codify in their culture what they have decodified from another. How to interpret, for example, something unknown for their people. Sometimes there is a shadowy coincidence between the Hebrew language and the non-Western indigenous language, such as *Shalom*: “to live a pleasant life” “wet fxi’zeñii” in the Nasa Yuwe language of the Nasa people of Colombia, or the famous “suma kausai” of the Andean culture. But

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<sup>4</sup> From that comes the rationale for cognitive linguistics and the theory of relevance.

sometimes, the majority of times, there is no way to express with a single term the density of a concept, whether theological or not. In this struggle sometimes one relies on expressions very much of the culture. In the book *Significado y diversidad cultural*, by E. Nida and W. Reyburn<sup>5</sup>, the best expression for talking about the forgiveness of God in one of the languages of New Guinea is “God does not hang up jaws”<sup>6</sup>. If some linguistic borrowing from the dominant language says nothing to me, but this expression does, can we choose it following dynamic equivalency? "Reconciliation" on an inter-human level in the NASA culture is translated as “to arrange the mouth”, "I speak, you speak, we arrange ourselves." The major interest of the translator is that his people, to whom the translation is directed, have access to the Word, not by means of a strange and dominant language, but in their own language, their maternal language. It is said that the maternal language is the language of the heart; the one whose content one does not have to process in one's brain in order to understand it, but it flows in a natural way and moves our emotions.

Then we have the intended audience of the translation with their culture. Much of it already expressed in the same language. In the case of the indigenous languages of Abya Yala, we are talking about marginated cultures, languages that are looked down on. The peoples from whom

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene Nida and William D. Reyburn, *Significado y diversidad cultural* (Miami: SBU, 2001), 5.

<sup>6</sup> It corresponds to a practice which takes place in conflicts between tribes.

the land has been taken, who have been deceived into the present time; and despite this, and despite vigorous evangelization, they are bearers of an ancestral spiritual strength which can be empowered even more with empowering translations of the Bible. Biblical translations well done give dignity to the peoples. In my experience I have seen a great depth of satisfaction, that, although many do not know how to read even in their own language, affirm with pride : "We also have the book in our language." It fits in here to say that the translation of the Bible into indigenous languages has aided in stabilizing the language and preserving it. It is a contribution, not only spiritual for those who are Christians and use the Bible in the dominant language of a country; but which also is an anthropological and linguistic contribution. And in languages in danger of extinction, the translation is the footprint of their past existence. But that should not be misunderstood, I refer to those cultures which have been evangelized and have the Bible as their sacred book; not those translations imposed by force, without permission and without dialogue, on cultures which have their own religion in their own sacred book.

Continuing with the point of the translator. The translator has in mind this, her people. In the process of re-codifying the message, her cultural biblical knowledge and her knowledge of her culture and the goal language, are configuring the text of the translation after a great battle of

dialogue and intercultural discussion. I'm talking about a going and coming, a making and remaking, a putting of oneself in the place of the readers until the message sounds concordant, natural, clear and acceptable. A translation close to the source text and attractive to the target language. Not boring.

### The pluricultural dialogue in the translation of the Bible

This intercultural dialogue can be more complex if we assume in every subject of the translation (text, translator, audience) a text, a background and a foreground. I'm referring to the hermeneutical methodology that we use in the popular, communitarian or pastoral reading of the Bible – however one wants to call it. I think that many of us present here are familiar with this approach, which consists in analyzing the text in itself, the background of the text, and the foreground of the text. We're talking about a contextual hermeneutic which opens onto three dimensions: the literary analysis (the text), the socio-historical context (the background of the text, its genesis), and the socio-cultural, religious and economic context of the readers (to whom the text is directed). We do this frequently in workshops on biblical animation.

And so, if we apply this hermeneutical approach to the three subjects present in the translation (text, translator and audience or receiver) we

encounter a fascinating pluricultural dialogue. We encounter three texts, three translators or authors and three receivers. The text in itself has its background; it is the socio-historical context which brought it to produce a determined text (discourse, narrative, poetry, genealogy...). The text has its own structure and literary context; its authors unconsciously give expression to their intercultural dialogue taking into account the first audience: their culture, cosmovision, location, ethnicity... It's not the same thing to write a letter to Jews as it is to Gentiles.

The translator, for his part, produces a text, his translation, and in writing the translation becomes an author. The text of the translator also has its background, its culture and language, its particular socio-economic situation, its profession of faith, is or her capacity as a translator. It's possible to perceive this through the translation. The translator produces a text thinking about his audience, his people or primary readers, this is his foreground.

Finally, the receivers or audience of the translation also have their background, that is their socio-cultural, religious, economic and linguistic context which conditions their reading of the translation. Their text is the reading which makes of the translation a conditioned interpretation for their background. Might it be that the audience of a translation has a foreground? Yes, we're talking about their re-readings

of the translation, conditioned by their particular perspectives: a feminist reading of the Bible, a campesino reading, a Afro-descendent reading, a reading from the poor, from the gay perspective, etc.

In so far as the activity of translation is a pluricultural, polifaceted, dialogue whose first interest is to make the Word reach all cultures, including the subcultures that are inside a culture. This Word of God is empowering, and for this it has need of empowered translators.<sup>7</sup>

b) Translation of the Bible from a written language to a visual, chronological and performative language

What has been said about spoken languages can be applied to sign languages, but in a somewhat different way. I'm referring to the translation of the Bible into sign languages, whose final product is not a book but a filming.

In recent years there has been an explosion of sign languages because the countries of the world began to recognize them officially. To date, it is said there are more than 400 languages. The deaf community of the world (some 70 million according to the World Federation of the deaf community) has achieved dignity for several decades, and has affirmed

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<sup>7</sup> See Tymoczko, Maria, *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (Manchester, UK & Kinderhook, NY: St. Jerome Publishing, 2007), 220-264.

its identity as a deaf community, possessing a visual, gesturing, spatial, performative and simultaneous language. The deaf community of each country has its own sign language, a complete language, with the same universal linguistic goals of every language, such as the phonemes, morphemes and syntax.

The translation of the Bible into sign languages has also accelerated. There are around 40 translation projects in the world and every year more are added.<sup>8</sup> There's a great difference between translating the Bible from a written language to another written or spoken language; and translating from a written language to a visual language. We're talking about two different systems of signs, two semiotic systems. The translation of the Bible into sign languages is an inter-semiotic translation; or it may be of two systems of signs: one linear, morphosyntactical (the Bible), and the other visual, chronological, spatial and performative. (The language of the deaf community), see the video about Matthew 14:22–24 (Jesus walks on the water in the sign language of Lithuania).

In the video we can observe the *ethos* of the sign language, which shows us deaf culture. We observe its own classifiers of sign languages, the narrator, the personages represented, the localization of the events and

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<sup>8</sup> There are various organizations dedicated as well to the translation of the Bible into sign languages (DOOR), SIL, SBU, Deaf Missions, etc.

the personages, the emotions, the chronological re-ordering of the deeds and many more things.

The intercultural dialogue between the biblical text and sign language, mediated by the translator, is similar in many aspects to spoken languages, but also is sufficiently different, due to the fact that the translation is intersemiotic. The translator struggles to make his translation clear and natural, besides being acceptable to the deaf community which she has in mind. Since the language is visual and chronological she has to re-order the details and events, so that it visualizes the text first. In this process of mental semantic visualization, before choosing the sign (her vocabulary), she imagines the order of the events (she re-orders the verses), makes explicit deeds not present in the text, but necessary for understanding; she visualizes and locates in the air personages and places; to personify each personage, including the narrator, she gives them a certain identity. In order to be able to express visually her narrative the translator needs to know the culture, uses and customs of the original text. The biblical text many times remains silent in front of the questionings of the deaf translator, and the translator therefore must search out in extra biblical sources the data which she needs in order to complete the translation and make it understandable for the deaf community. She needs to fill in the gaps with necessary data in her translation.

Any important aspect of translating into Sign Languages has to do with identity. The translator is visible, because the letter exists in his body. Being visible he shows his culture in a more evident manner, his gender, his style. This is delicate because if the one signing is not accepted by the community, the translation can be rejected. Or in extreme cases, when in some countries it's dangerous to be Christian, his translation gives him away as such, resulting in activity risky for him or her, the translator. Because of this in some projects the translators disguise themselves or opt for projects of animated translation.

*The danger of counting on only one language and only one culture.*

We have seen the process of translating the Bible as an intercultural and pluricultural activity. We understand the diversity of cultures and languages as a gift of God. Just one language, just one culture, just one thought are impositions which lead to domination, authoritarianism, and dictatorship. The Sacred Scriptures in the myth of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-11) warn us about this danger.<sup>9</sup> The myth, like every myth, is open to different interpretations; the dominant explanation, the more traditional one, has been to see the dispersion and diversity of

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<sup>9</sup> Here I add a few paragraphs taken from my article, "Challenges of Pluriculturalism to Bible Translation", presented at the conference *Translation, Identity and Heterogeneity*, organized by the Nida Institute and other institutions, at the University of San Marcos, Peru, December, 2007.

languages as a divine punishment for wanting to be like God.

Nevertheless, in Latin America, the interpretation of the myth in the movement of biblical reading takes a different path. The diversity of languages is seen as a divine protection against a single homogenizing and tyrannical language, which demands that all humanity do the same and have the same name. Verses 1 and 5 point out the problem in depth: all the earth was speaking the same language and in the same words (literally the whole earth was of one lip and word). This characteristic of a single language allows for the unification of the population for the project of founding a city with a tower reaching to the heavens. The symbolism of this tower points to superiority and control from above. It refers to a project out of proportion and which goes beyond all limits. The number one is repeated in the narration: one language, one city, one tower and one name. Since they have a single language and are a single people, they have all the potential they need to found a city, a tower and give it a single name by which to be known throughout the earth. Yahweh intervenes and disperses them to force them to speak different languages. The hegemonic project comes from below through the diversity of languages.

The univocacy sketched in the the figure of the “open” tower, erected with disproportionate measurements, connotes arrogance, power and control. The act of Yahweh against the tower, warns us about the

potential danger of counting on a single language, a single culture. The diversity of languages and cultures in the myth is the protection from God so that there is no domination among human beings.

In conclusion I would like to underline that when one speaks about cultural translation one is alluding to the foundation which empowers both the translation and the translators, as Maria Tymoczko indicates, the struggle in intercultural translation gives the greater responsibility to the translator, achieving a translation of better quality and better ethical conscience.<sup>10</sup>

May all the translations of the Bible into different languages and cultures which seek it be welcome.

*Translation by Gary Riebe-Estrella, S.V.D.*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 263-264.