

CONVERSATIONAL LANGUAGE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: TRANSLATION ISSUES

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Anyone who has taken conversational French and then tried to pass a literary French exam for a doctoral program has discovered the difference between the two types of language. Similarly, if, like me, you took a theological German class but no other German, you might have passed your German exam with flying colors but are unlikely to be able to carry on a casual conversation in Berlin. Even the difficulty that some of us have when reading our papers out loud at conferences like this one highlights the difference between conversational English and prose, ya' know what I mean?

In our presentation in 2011, Wave Nunnally and I argued that when the Hebrew Bible records conversations there is often a detectable, stylistic shift, so that these conversations are linguistically different from the narrative in which they are embedded. My further study, along with casual reading of the Hebrew text, convinces me that our earlier analysis was essentially correct.

However, this brought up a problem: there are books like *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, and *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, but how would one come up with *The Idea of Biblical Conversation*? The aforementioned books can help the non-specialist deduce characteristics of narrative and poetry in ways which they can apply to their reading of English Bibles, for they can tell by the layout if they it is poetry or prose. But is this the case when it comes to conversation?

At first one might think the answer is simple: just look for quotation marks and *voila*, you've got it! The problem is that it does not work that way in practice.

What I needed was someone who did not know Hebrew but was willing to take a close look. With the help of one of my sharper students, Kaitlyn Justus, we put this to the test. Kaitlyn has been doing a research internship with me since last fall, and she has been cataloguing instances of back and forth discussions in Genesis, and is now looking at 1-2 Samuel. What made her insight valuable was that she had just begun Hebrew last fall, and when I initially had her look at a bunch of conversations which I had examined in Hebrew, she did not know what was going on in Hebrew. Thus the question I put to her was basically this: what can you deduce from these English conversations--stylistically?

Here is what she found.

[ENTER KAITLYN]

In other words, the problem is that translations tend to be so homogeneous that they are too consistently formal or dynamic equivalents, thus ironing out stylistic differences between prose and conversation. A second problem--and I think this contributes to translations being homogeneous--is that the translator already has to do a tremendous amount of rewording because of different word order, the necessity of translating idioms, conveying verbless clauses, and even varying the sheer number of units of meaning (individual words in English). This typically results in a loss of the style of the original conversations, and if it were not for quotation marks and an increase in first and second person pronouns, the English reader would have no idea that *anything* else was different.

There is nothing new about not noticing stylistic differences in Hebrew. A colleague of mine, Dr. Dwight Sheets, examined a sampling of LXX passages. xxxxxxxxxxxx bla bla bla זאת זאת

Problems with rendering conversation in translation:

2. The different ways that different languages convey meaning means that word order, idioms, and even the number of words (units of meaning) will necessarily vary. For example, We cannot ignore the need for verbs in verbless clauses, lest the reader misunderstand the syntax of the original.

There is clearly a lot more work to be done, and I have a student doing a research internship who is cataloguing.

The main question I have is this: how can we translate conversational Hebrew, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, in a way which helps the English reader see that it is different? Can this be done and still remain faithful to the original?

We often cannot replicate the actual characteristics of conversational Hebrew. However, we can adjust our translation style so that the reader knows there is a stylistic shift in the Hebrew.

Since The New American Standard Bible is generally regarded to be a hyper-literal translation of the Biblical text, I have decided to use it to represent a more literal translation.

Note that I am NOT advocating a Message-style translation. That makes all the language colloquial. Rather, I am proposing that we make a stylistic shift when we encounter stylistic shifts in the text. This already occurs with most translations when poetry is encountered.

Options (take the same verse and do it three ways):

Try to replicate, Yoda-style, the original.

Advantages: retrovertable.

Disadvantages:

It could be so awkward that it would be unreadable

It would leave the impression that the ancients talked quite strange.

Render with current English idioms while trying to be retrovertable.

Advantages: possibly retrovertable.

Disadvantages: literalness might be lost.

Render with current English idioms and forget about being retrovertable.

Advantages: It would look like conversational language and thus be seen as stylistically different.

Disadvantages: Cultural information might be lost.

Two years ago Wave Nunnally and I presented our preliminary findings concerning conversational language in the Hebrew Bible. We noted a number of characteristics which distinguish it from the literary Hebrew in which it is embedded. In my study (and casual reading) in the last couple of years I have noted that these characteristics apply to many, many passages which were not in the initial analysis. [See handout]

Translations tend to be pretty homogeneous.

If they are a dynamic equivalent, that is their philosophy throughout.

If they are a formal equivalent (e.g., NASB), that is also their philosophy throughout.

The same holds true for paraphrases.

Thus the English reader can rarely, if ever, tell the difference between prose and conversation, except for the quotation marks.

The problem is that none of the above approaches adequately distinguishes between conversational, colloquial language and the (usually) narrative in which it is embedded.

Philosophically, the original NASB has one fatal flaw: the translators took all address of God and made it formal language. The problem is that that does not reflect, linguistically, what is going on.

My wife said that I should not translate “gird up your loins” as “put your big girl panties on”. “Big boy pants” works.

Further research and just reading shows that a lot of the characteristics which we identified two years ago are pretty consistent.

Check: אֵל stuff,

Didn't see as many strange word order stuff when it came to divine-human, but more common in Samuel.

Issues:

Translations tend to be homogeneous, whether formal equivalent, dynamic equivalent, or paraphrase. Yoda: *hmmm?*

Issues such as verbless clauses and implied prepositions involve adding words in English whose origin in Hebrew is based on syntax and context, not individual units of meaning.

I do not see a way of indicating in English the specific aspects of conversational language which Hebrew has. Rather, my idea is to use our colloquial/informal language to represent their colloquial language.

One cannot see in English translations that conversational Hebrew looks different from literary Hebrew.

Translations tend to be homogeneous.

Ideas: translating into colloquial English.

Retrovertible: S'me (I). [1 Kgs 13]

Non-retrovertible:

Yep. You got'm. You got me.

Put on your big boy pants (gird up your loins).[Jer 1]

Did ancient translations carry across the distinctions?

Greek

Aramaic Targums

How to translate הנה in conversation: behold? Yo? Wait a second? This will certainly vary.

Suggestions:

Use contractions.

Use slang [colloquial language]

Difficulties:

Word order changes. Something else has to indicate these.

Samples

Jeremiah 1

JER 1 5 בטרם אצורך בבטן ידעתך ובטרם תצא מרחם הקדשתך נביא לגוים נתתיך:

JER 1 6 ואמר אהה אדני יהוה הנה לא ידעתי דבר כי נער אנכי:

JER 1 7 ויאמר יהוה אלי אל תאמר נער אנכי כי על כל אשר אשלחך תלך ואת כל אשר אצוך תדבר:

JER 1 8 אל תירא מפניהם כי אתך אני להצילך נאם יהוה:

5 “I knew you before I formed you in the belly, and I set you apart before you came forth from the womb. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

6 And I said, “Wait a second, Lord Yahweh, hey, I don’t know how to speak, because I’m only a teenager.”

7 And Yahweh said to me, “Don’t say, ‘I’m just a teenager,’ because you will go everywhere I send you, and you will speak everything which I command you.”

8 Don’t be scared of them, because I am with you to deliver you,” declares Yahweh.

1 Kings 13

Genesis 22

Job 1-2

1:6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present [station] themselves to Yahweh, and [the] Satan also came among them.

1:7

NASB: The LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it."

Proposal: And Yahweh said to [the] Satan, "Where ya been?" And Satan answered Yahweh and said, "Roamin' about Earth and goin' back'n forth on it."

[vv8-9 do not appear to have any uniquely conversational elements]

1:10

NASB: "Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.

Proposal: "Haven't ya put a fence all around Job, his family, and all that he has? You've blessed everything he does, and his property is everywhere."

[v 11 does not appear to have any unique conversational elements]

1:12

NASB: Then the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him." So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD.

Proposal: And Yahweh said to Satan, "OK, everything he has is in your power. However, you've gotta keep your mitts off him." So Satan went forth from Yahweh's presence.

1 Kgs 13:14

NASB: So he went after the man of God and found him sitting under an oak; and he said to him, "Are you the man of God who came from Judah?" And he said, "I am."

Proposals: "Are ya' the man of God who came from Judah?" And he said, "Yep." [or "S'me" or "T'is I" or "Ya' got me" or "You got'm"]

Issues: redundant subject pronoun, single word answer.

Judg 13:17-18

17

Literal: who your name that will come your words and we may honor you?

NASB: Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that when your words come to pass, we may honor you?"

LOL Cats: an' den Manoah axed teh angel "wut iz yer name?"

Proposal: What's your name, so we can honor you when your words come to pass?

The Message: Then Manoah asked the angel of God, "What's your name? When your words come true, we'd like to honor you."

18

Literal: Why is this, you will ask for my name, and it is wonderful?

NASB: But the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?"

The Message: The angel of God said, "What's this? You ask for my name? You wouldn't understand—it's sheer wonder."

LOL Cats: an' teh anjel sayed "lol you won't understand mai name n00b!!2!!"

Proposal: Why on earth are you asking me for my name, when it is too special [for you to know]?

Proposal 2: What's up with this? Why do you wanna know my name, since it's special?

Issues:

Use of מי to mean "what?", not "who?".

Use of למה זה to mean "what is this?" or "what's up with this?" (cf. always in conversation: Gen 18:13; 25:22; 32:30 [of an angel]; Exod 2:20; 5:22 [formal for NASB]; 17:3; Num 11:20;).

Josh 7:10 (God); 1 Sam 17:28; 20:8; 26:18 to Saul (formal yet informal); 2 Sam 3:24 Joab to David; 2 Sam 18:22 Joab to runner; 2 Sam 12:23 David concerning his dead son (why on earth would I . . .)

take the glasses off moment

A mixture of formal and informal language: 1 Sam 26:18.

1SAM 26 17 ויכר שאול את קול דוד ויאמר הקולך זה בני דוד ויאמר דוד קולי אדני המלך:
1SAM 26 18 ויאמר למה זה אדני רדף אחרי עבדו כי מה עשיתי ומה בידי רעה:

Formal language often refers to the "greater" with third person language. This passage mixes idiomatic language with formal language.

NASB: Then Saul recognized David's voice and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And David said, "It is my voice, my lord the king."

1Sa 26:18 He also said, "Why then is my lord pursuing his servant? For what have I done? Or what evil is in my hand?"

From David's reply:

Lit: My voice, my lord the King.

Proposal: “It’s my voice, my lord the King.” He also said, “Why on earth is my lord pursuing his servant? What’ve I done which is wrong?”

Suggestions:

1. Use colloquial language or slang.
2. Use contractions.
3. Don’t always use complete sentences.
4. Be more formal with the prose.

ORIGINAL nasb PROBLEM: THEY TOOK LANGUAGE AS FORMAL WHICH, IN RELIABILITY, WAS informal.