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Translating Zephaniah in context

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8 – Summary and conclusions

Translations aim to make a message understandable to an audience which is culturally or linguistically distant from the original audience. Something must be done to communicate or transmit the message to the target audience, and the audience must be able to receive or understand the message in a manner that reasonably reflects the author's intention.

Cognitive linguists have shown how this process of transmission and reception far exceeds the complexity of a model that encodes and decodes messages with a one to one correspondence. They have shown that the transmitter, as well as the receiver, both operate from a cognitive framework that includes a vast array of background information intertwined in such a way as to make the communicative process so complicated that it is a wonder that communication can even take place.

In this research, the contextual frames of reference model serves as the framework to explore some of the intricacies in translating a Hebrew prophetic document from the seventh century B.C. for a West African Muslim people group called the Susu.

8.1 A Hebrew prophet

The first two chapters of this dissertation examine the Hebrew prophet Zephaniah, and the short book accredited to his name. The rhetorical structure of the book follows an ABAB pattern that promises divine destruction before making an appeal for repentance. The first discourse addresses Judah, while the second addresses all of the nations of the world. Various rhetorical devices lend weight to the appeal such as the claim of divine authority. The prophet affirms to speak on behalf of God, and he actually uses direct speech to highlight this theological truth. He motivates his audience to repentance by juxtaposing divine punishment to divine blessings of social justice and shalom.

The textual structure of the book of Zephaniah reveals a sampling of Hebrew literary devices designed to enhance the impact of the message on its seventh century audience. The author uses numerous techniques to maintain cohesion in the discourse, highlight certain key points, and present the material in an aesthetic manner that engages the mind and emotions of the audience. This detailed study of the Hebrew text shows the way in which grammatical intricacies can highlight the rhetorical nature of a hortatory text.

8.2 A Susu Imam

Chapters three and four describe a Muslim *xutuba* (i.e. Friday sermon) delivered by a Susu Imam during the period of the *hajj* and the important religious celebration of *Eid al-Adha*. The rhetorical structure of the sermon describes in detail the pilgrimage to Mecca and uses those characteristics as a theological foundation for exhorting Guineans to pursue social harmony. The sermon is not an “exposition” regarding the religious celebration, rather an “exhortation” to live a life of peace and unity.

The Imam uses a rich inventory of rhetorical devices and grammatical structures to enhance the impact of his message. Much like the prophet Zephaniah, the Imam develops the concept of divine authority to which all humans should submit. His message, stemming from divine authority, should then be obeyed. A series of

blessings points to the logical conclusion that following the exhortation will lead to material and spiritual benefits; another reason for the audience to submit to the exhortation. The sermon uses various literary devices to embellish the message and make it more impactful, some of which are found also in the Hebrew literature such as the use of *inclusio*, couplets, and parallelism.

8.3 Communication between the Hebrew and Susu worlds

With the foundational description of a piece of hortatory communication from the ancient Hebrew prophetic world and an analogous communication from the modern Susu Muslim context, the next challenge of this research focused on how the gap between the two worlds might be bridged to formulate an effective communicative tool, namely a contextualized translation of Zephaniah into Susu. The cognitive linguistic framework which serves as the foundation of the contextualized frames of reference model provides an understanding of the elements necessary for a transfer of meaning to take place.

The most important element of the communicative puzzle provides a shared cognitive environment between the author and the audience. Without this shared understanding of worldview and historical background, true communication cannot take place. In some way the translator needs to provide the modern audience with a lens through which they can accurately understand the original message.

Another element which adds an aesthetic element to the equation consists in literary devices that the author and the translator can use to enhance the impact of their message. In the original communication, the Hebrew prophet used certain devices for various reasons. The effect no doubt rendered his message beautiful and powerful for those hearing the original message. The translation team, after having understood the use of those devices, then needs to find literary devices that can be used for the communicational benefit of the modern audience. In some cases the same devices can be used with similar effects, but in other instances these will need to be changed in order to produce the same effect.

A comparison of Hebrew Zephaniah and the Susu *Xutuba* shows that the prophets of Israel and the Susu imams have many religious themes in common. Just a few are: the sovereignty and authority of God, the importance of social justice and well-being, the role of religious tradition, and the concept of punishment and reward based on morality.

While this commonality makes the translation of Zephaniah a relevant piece of literature for Susu Muslims, the communicative context of seventh century Hebrew literature necessitates that a cognitive background be provided, either in the text or in the paratext, for the message to be understood by the Susu audience. This critical step for the translator takes various forms at different linguistic levels. Since the Susu are unaware of the four city names that were synonymous of the Philistine civilization in the Ancient Near East, for example, the Susu instrumental translation refers to “Gaza” as the “city of Gaza” (Zephaniah 2:4) to provide the background necessary to understand completely this reference. In other cases, the translator has to deduce exegetically from the text the referent of a noun phrase that would be otherwise incomprehensible for the Susu. In Zephaniah 3:10, for example, the “daughter of Zion” becomes the “beloved ones of Jerusalem who stand on God’s holy mountain of Zion.” In these cases, the translator exegete takes special attention to not add to the meaning of the original text, but rather to clarify the meaning with careful edits to the

translation. The documentary translation makes the same clarifications, but uses the footnotes in the paratext to do so.

The analysis of the text of Hebrew *Zephaniah* and the Susu *Xutuba* show that there are numerous rhetorical textual devices in common between the two languages. They serve to enhance the cohesion of the discourse, mark the specific sub-units, and add a literary aesthetic component. Both languages use devices like repetition, symmetry, and parallelism, but the grammatical structure of the respective languages can limit how the author uses these devices. Hebrew is able, for example, in *Zephaniah* 3:19b-c, to produce a grammatical chiasmus with a pre-verb direct object and a post-verb direct object in two sequential lines, but Susu is obligated to follow a strict pre-verb direct object paradigm. The translation cannot mirror the chiasmus, but it can use other types of parallelism that are compatible with the grammar of the Susu language.

Changes in text organization also need to be made in keeping with a lack of correspondence between the discourse features in Hebrew and Susu. While Hebrew can mark a new unit by referring to a participant in the first person after having referred to the same participant in the third person in the previous unit, the Susu need an ulterior clarification that the participant is the same in both units. The translator is obligated to make additions to the text to make this clear. Another example, found in *Zephaniah* 1:2, consists of fronting the statement “declares the Lord” in the Susu translation, instead of putting it in the middle of the declaration itself. The Hebrew pattern in this case causes confusion to the Susu reader, so the translation needs to accommodate for this discourse difference between the two languages in order to not confuse the Susu reader.

While the details of the rhetorical devices used in Hebrew *Zephaniah* and in the Susu *Xutuba* are described in detail in the body of this research, the necessary modifications made in the text of the instrumental translation in order to accommodate the differences between the two languages, are pointed out in the footnotes of that translation. Through a careful review of these two sources, the reader can ascertain the important translation principles at play when it comes to communicating a contextualized message.

Two translation models demonstrated

Two translation models were presented in this research (chapters five and six) that both attempt to bridge the gap between the ancient Hebrew world and the modern Susu context. They do this very different ways. The documentary approach uses a literal translation of the Hebrew text that is also accompanied by an elaborate paratextual apparatus which provides the cognitive environment necessary for the Susu audience to comprehend *Zephaniah*'s message. By reading the two texts, the Susu can see precisely the articulation of the original document, as well as the contextualized meaning of the document from a Susu perspective.

The instrumental approach on the other hand, attempts to modify the original text in such a way as to make it understandable to the Susu audience without the use of an extensive paratextual apparatus. This type of translation seeks to use the text itself as a communicative instrument with the hope that this direct communication will be more effective for an audience who has a limited willingness to invest very much processing effort with these foreign texts.

The two translations in this dissertation do not represent the effort of a specific translation organization to provide the Susu people with a translation of *Zephaniah*.

The author of this dissertation produced the translations as a purely academic exercise to explore the intricacies of contextualized translation where rhetorical insights and discourse techniques are taken into consideration. The author's twenty-five years of field work in Guinea provided him with the linguistic and cultural insights necessary to postulate what these two models of translation would like look in the Susu context. The translation work done during these years independently of this doctoral research has provided numerous opportunities to discuss cases where understanding breaks down between the Biblical text and the Susu communication framework both with Muslims and Christians.

Reflections on the advantages of disadvantages of the two models

The advantages and the disadvantages of these two models have already been discussed in chapters five and six, but a final reflection regarding the difference of these two approaches needs to be articulated. The need to inform the modern audience of the cognitive environment in which an ancient document was produced clearly exists. Translators appreciate the contribution of cognitive linguists who have emphasized this complexity of communication. However, translators do not always agree on exactly how to apply these insights to their work. The two example translations in this research clearly demonstrate that diversity.

Perhaps a helpful way to articulate this difference lies in the terminology used to describe a translation publication. A documentary approach to translation could state their final goal as a "contextualized commentary" in which the original text is reproduced in the target language and a paratextual apparatus is provided which explains the document. The instrumental approach on the other hand, could state that their final goal is a "contextualized translation" in which the original text is modified so as to clarify the supposed meaning for a particular language and culture.

The contextualized commentary would be ideal for those people who have an intense desire to study the ancient texts for themselves. They willingly grapple with the cultural diversity between their context and that of the ancient prophets in order that they might benefit from that intellectual discovery process. This approach could also serve an audience who view Holy Scripture as a static literature which is best preserved in its original context rather than adapting it to a modern context. People of this mindset would best be served by a contextualized commentary in that they could possess the original text, but at the same time have a commentary of the text that would help them to understand it and apply it to their own life.

The contextualized translation on the other hand, would be ideal for people who are willing to engage the text, but who want to do so with minimal effort. They prefer that the text be a quick and direct tool to understand the original message. They are not necessarily willing to invest time and intellectual effort to make sense of a difficult to understand text. This can be due to their religious allegiance, which already suspects the utility of these texts from another religion, or it could be due to a lack of experience or willingness to deduct the meaning of a text based on information provided from another source (i.e. the paratextual apparatus).

In the final analysis both approaches can be useful either for distinct audiences, or for the same audience at different phases of their spiritual exploration. A "translation brief" for any given translation project should clearly delineate the *skopos* of a project and from that *skopos* determine the best translation approach to employ.

Voices from the Susu community substantiate the utility of both approaches. Some who are focused on the integrity of the Biblical text due to their own perspective on the interplay between divine inspiration and translation, tend to opt for a more literal treatment of the text. However, when the Susu read or listen to the contextualized translation, they inevitably comment on the clarity and the rhetorical power of the text resulting from the instrumental approach.

The prospect of using footnotes in the documentary model certainly opens the door to a “both-and” approach to translation where the document is translated literally but the reader finds a contextualized explanation of the text in the footnotes. The question remains just how accessible is this information in the footnotes for a people with low reading skills and little experience in deducting the meaning of texts through a series of parallel notes. Some Susu believe that such skills can be taught, but no one would dare believe this to be an easy process. Whoever proposes such methods will have to struggle with the question of just how much this extra processing could discourage a mass usage of the text by a largely illiterate population.

The Susu community played a critical yet indirect role in this research project. While they were not involved directly in the translation choices made of the text of Zephaniah presented in this work, their voice had been heard and listened to over the past 25 years of field work of the author during which time numerous people in numerous situations expressed their likes and dislikes for certain translation styles and choices. In actuality it was the Susu voice that prompted this research in an attempt to find a way to express the truths, the artistic value, and the compelling spiritual insights that can come from ancient texts. While the delicate and difficult Susu socio-religious context defies the task of providing a quantifiable evaluation of such preferences, the researcher trusts that the analysis that led to the proposal of multiple possible ways to address the issues at hand will be useful to translators and communicators in various contexts.

8.4 Conclusion

Independently of theological differences or preferences, if the Hebrew prophet Zephaniah had been a Susu Muslim in the twenty first century, might his message resemble the instrumental translation given in the previous chapter? This question touches the essence of this research. Having studied the composition of Zephaniah’s message in context, and having analyzed the composition of an analogous message in the Susu Muslim context, the hope was to develop a translation that would allow a Susu Muslim to “hear” the message without the distraction of “foreign elements.” The purpose was to create a contextually relevant translation of Zephaniah for the Susu Muslim.

The research began with the question: Can a rhetorical analysis of analogous discourses, both in the source and in a target language, assist in the development of a meaningful translation? The course of this research has led the author to deduce from a hortatory passage in Hebrew (source) and from an analogous hortatory passage in Susu (target) a series of rhetorical devices, some that can be used in both languages, and some that are peculiar to only one or the other of the languages. These devices have been used to translate the book of Zephaniah in Susu in a clear and meaningful fashion. This has been exemplified in two different translation approaches, one providing key information in the paratext, and a second in an instrumental translation. Clearly the comparison of rhetorical devices between analogous discourses in a