

# Shifts of style

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## **English Biblical Translation**

A. C. Partridge

(Andre Deutsch, £3.75)

There was a time when studies of bible translation were considered legitimate game for theologians or biblical scholars only—apart, that is, from the translators themselves. The present book has an author who is none of these. He is Professor of English Language at Witwatersrand University; and he presents an account of the problems and practices of biblical translation which will be fresh and thought-provoking for anyone who has been brought up solely on a traditional diet of scriptural criticism.

The book's coverage is quite straightforward. After a brief introduction, there is a chapter on the sources of the Bible and its texts; Ch.3 deals with early translations (Anglo-Saxon glosses, Early Middle English, Wyclif); Ch.4, Erasmus and Tyndale; Ch.5, Coverdale and the Great Bible (of 1540); Ch.6, the Geneva, Bishops' and Rheims-Douai versions; Ch.7 and Ch.8 provide a detailed analysis of the language of the King James Bible and its liturgical and rhetorical implications; Ch.9 looks at the later revisions in England and America (Challoner, Revised Version, American Standard Version, RSV); Ch.10 is on the individual (as opposed to the committee) translations of Moffat, Knox, and Phillips; Ch.11 looks at the Jerusalem and New English Bibles; and there is a brief concluding chapter. It is a neat organisation of the material; the balance of treatment is fair; and the book reads well. The only noticeable weakness is that coverage of the modern period is very thin, there being hardly any references to the present-day climates of opinion about translation, and the policies of the various denominations

towards it. There is no mention of ICEL and related work in this book, for instance.

Partridge's treatment implies two aims and audiences. Each chapter has two parts. Firstly there is an introductory, but quite adequate account of the historical and intellectual background of the various translations: nothing original here, but a necessary and convenient guide for the student and interested layman. The "student" involved is primarily the student of English; for in this book, the author is completing an argument about the development of the English language which he began with two earlier books for the Deutsch Language Library—*Tudor to Augustan English*, and *The Language of Renaissance Poetry*—and his thesis is to show the important influence the Bible has had upon English usage as a whole. The theologian and biblical scholar will find more of interest in the second part of each chapter, in which there is a detailed analysis and comparison of the language of samples taken from the various texts. The techniques he uses are not particularly new within English studies—I remember being given samples of the Anglo-Saxon, Wyclif, and Tyndale Gospels to compare linguistically in my BA finals, for instance—but they are not widely known outside, and I am sure that many will find his orientation illuminating.

One example of the potential value of the systematic, descriptive, comparative method used is in providing us with a corrective for the opaque generalisations that are often made about the stylistic character of a translation. It is the easiest thing in the world to talk about the language of a text as being "complex", "obscure", "concise", "weighty", "idiomatic", "ponderous" and so on. These labels may be meaningful to their progenitors, but to others they are regularly vague, and are often taken in a different sense from that originally intended. Often they are no more than impressions, based upon a few examples taken from a small selection of biblical textual styles. To become consistently and objectively meaningful, their use must be supported by detailed reference to the structural characteristics of the language found in the translation. "Concise" might then be shown to relate to the use of a specific set of sentence patterns, or the non-use of certain constructions or words; and so on. But demonstrating such things requires a painstaking, systematic, minute and time-consuming preliminary study; and many people are unable or unwilling to carry out the prerequisite labour. This book I think, through its many illustrative analyses, performs a useful double function: it quickly shows us why it is worth doing a detailed stylistic study, and gives us a pretty good idea about how to set about doing it. Partridge's comparison of Tyndale and Coverdale (72-3) provides a good succinct illustration.

A stylistic analysis, in other words, brings the linguistic issues out into the open: it forces you to look for important linguistic patterns not immediately apparent; it provides evidence for or against a generalisation; it makes a consistent and

systematic comparison of styles possible; and it provides a framework which the critic can use to coordinate and prompt his observations. And when Partridge concentrates on the detailed comparison of texts, he is very good. But this book has a weakness, in that it spends too much time on textual analysis, and not enough on theoretical discussion. In a book of this kind, one expects a solid introductory and concluding section, in which (for instance) different views about the nature of the translation process are worked through, possible criteria of a successful translation systematically examined, and other general matters raised. But there are only 5 pages of Introduction here, and only 3½ pages of conclusions out of 245, and the discussion they contain is bitty, oversimplified, and contains few interesting remarks of a general nature. Partridge's stereotype of a "best translator" (1) gives an awful first impression to the book, and my recommendation to any reader intrigued by my comments above is to get on to Chapter 2 as quickly as possible. This is a pity. There is, after all, plenty of excellent source material to use as the basis of a good theoretical discussion—Partridge in fact refers to some of it in his bibliography (e.g. Barr, Nida)—but his awareness of the real complexity of the issues, which is clear from the way he handles his textual material, does not emerge at all from the introductory or concluding sections. Nor does he amplify potentially interesting general questions throughout the book: sporadic general comments are made every now and again, but not developed, e.g. two sentences containing an interesting suggestion about the similarities between liturgical language and free verse are tacked on to Chapter 8, and left. Partridge is aware of many central theoretical principles: he sees the importance of context, as his discussion of the semantics of *grace* shows (43); he clearly shows the inadequacy of word-based translation; and he has relevant views about stylistic variability (e.g. 220). It is a shame he has not discussed these matters further. As it is, the introductory pages of any ICEL sample translation booklet provide a better theoretical perspective than the reader will find here.

It is perhaps on account of this inexplicitness that Partridge makes some very odd statements at times. Despite his attention to points of descriptive detail, he sometimes slides into the absolutely unintelligible critical language which his own method can attack so well, eg, "The Hebrew language was active, concrete, and little given to abstraction" (56); the poetry was "rough-hewn, impetuous and earnest, rather than graceful" (56); Coverdale's virtues included "temperance and chastity in the language" (62)—*in the language!* And at times he seems to be advocating a view of language which is totally removed from reality. He seems to tolerate the notion of a "timeless" English, for instance (231)—as he says, "assuming that the phenomenon is linguistically possible." "There is consensus of opinion among English Christians [including Partridge? it is not clear] that a

valuable institution like the Bible should not be subject to fluctuations of linguistic taste" (231). An English language scholar should do more than make opaque statements about such matters. He should jump on them, hard. He should make it clear that language reflects culture, and cannot be looked at as if the culture did not exist. If there is ever to be a timeless, unchanging English, it will only be when English culture has ceased to change, or ceased to exist. In the meantime, translators and critics have to accept *as a starting point* that English is changing ("unstable" is the word Partridge uses, 220) and heterogeneous. Partridge seems to accept the latter. On his last page, he says: "It may be that Christians need two forms of Bible"—one for the scholar, one for the lay reader. How true—but why stop here? Why not accept the principle that no translation can in the nature of things suit everyone, that the ideal of a "common" English for all time (or even for all countries, at *this* time) is a myth, that there will never be more than 50 percent agreement about the appropriateness or adequacy of any translation—and that there is, in short, no such animal as an "ideal" translation. Instead of hunting for the "most satisfactory" translation, we should really be hunting for the "least unsatisfactory" one, and facing up to the real issues (choice of stylistic level, decisions about cultural equivalence) instead of the red herrings. This book would have been of a much greater value if it had talked more about such things.

#### *Envoi*

Has anyone ever undertaken a systematic *comparative* biblical translation study, comparing the problems encountered in turning the original texts into a *range* of modern languages (not *just* English, or French or...)? The important problems in translation theory and practice when seen through English spectacles may be very different when seen through German ones. It would be interesting to do some cross-matching and find out. Another book for the Language Library, perhaps?

**David Crystal**