

The Translator as an Agent of Change and Transformation: The Case of Translating Biblical Proverbs

CYNTHIA L. MILLER-NAUDÉ AND JACOBUS A. NAUDÉ

(UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE)

ABSTRACT

This article explores the notion of the translator as an agent of cultural mediation with respect to a very difficult aspect of translation: the translation of biblical proverbs into Sudanese languages. Particular attention is paid to a recent argument concerning strategies for indigenisation and foreignisation as well as the matter of hegemony in translation. These possibilities and challenges are especially acute in the translation of proverbs. Differing strategies of foreignisation and indigenisation produce different kinds of translations, which, on the one hand, may fulfil differing needs within the community, and which, on the other hand, effect different kinds of change.

A INTRODUCTION

It has become clear in recent years that the translator is not simply a technician who mechanically transfers the meaning of a text in one language into another language. Instead, in every choice that is made, the translator is an agent of change and transformation.¹

This concept has been explored in an especially insightful way by Marais.² He argues that far from being automatic, translation involves a translator who has “an active hand in the intercultural process” because “language is always embedded in cultural and ideological structure.”³ As a result, a translation cannot travel to new surroundings without adapting to its new environment, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a translation will influence its new surroundings. Translators, then, must be aware of the active role that they

¹ See Maria Tymoczko, *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (Manchester: St Jerome) 2007.

² Jacobus Marais, “The Language Practitioner as Agent: The Implications of Recent Trends in Research for Language Practice in Africa.” *JNGS* 6/3 (2008): 35-47.

³ Marais, “Language Practitioner as Agent,” 35.

play in effecting change through the ideological choices made in the course of translation.

Marais further examines two alternative ways of translating the form of the text. In the first way, the form of the text is translated rigidly with the result that the translated text will seem foreign. In the second way, the form of the text is not translated, but rather comparable indigenous expressions in the culture of the translated text are used.⁴ He argues that in the South African context, translation should involve indigenisation—foreign texts (especially western texts) should be translated into South African languages using indigenous forms as a way of mitigating or subverting western influence. In taking this stance, Marais challenges Venuti, who argues in favour of foreignisation for the translation of non-western texts into English.⁵

The active hand of the translator in intercultural communication is also evident in situations involving asymmetrical power relationships.⁶ In translating from a hegemonic target culture like English into a dominated target culture such as Sesotho, a translator from the dominated target culture must apply strategies to overcome cultural exclusion. With respect to the hegemonic culture, these strategies may include subversion, adaptation or localisation of the hegemonic source culture; with respect to the dominated target culture, these strategies might include rehabilitation or enrichment.⁷

⁴ Marais, “Language Practitioner as Agent,” 40.

⁵ See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995) and idem, “Translation, Interpretation, Intertextuality” (unpublished lecture delivered at TRSS in London, June 2007).

⁶ See Jacobus A. Naudé, “The Afrikaans Bible Translations and the Formation of Cultural, Political and Religious Identities in South Africa,” in *Translation Yearbook of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies 2005* (ed. by J. House, R.M. Ruano, and N. Baumgarten; Seoul: IATIS, 2005), 167-179; idem, “The Shaping of Cultural Knowledge in South African Translation,” *SPIL* 36 (2005): 35-58; and idem, “Translation and Cultural Transformation: The Case of the Afrikaans Bible Translations,” in *Translation and Cultural Change: Studies in History, Norms and Image-projection* (ed. E. Hung Eva, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2005), 19-42.

⁷ See Somikazi G. Mlonyeni and Jacobus A. Naudé, “Enriching Xhosa Culture: The Transference of Social and Material Culture in the Xhosa Translation of ‘The Prisoner of Zenda,’” *Alternation* 11/2 (2004): 247-263; J. A. Naudé, “The Cultural Turn in South African Translation: Rehabilitation, Subversion and Resistance,” *Acta Academica* 37/1 (2005): 22-55; and idem, “Overcoming Cultural Exclusion: Globalisation and Localization Strategies in Literary Translation,” in *Multilingualism and Exclusion* (ed. P. Culvelier et al.; Pretoria: van Schaik, 2007).

HEGEMONIC Source culture → → **DOMINATED Target culture**

Subverted

Rehabilitated

Adapted

Enriched

Localised

Conversely, to translate from a dominated source culture (for example Sesotho) into a hegemonic target culture (English), the dominated source culture must be maintained or globalised and the hegemonic target culture must be resisted.⁸

DOMINATED Source culture

HEGEMONIC Target culture

Maintained

Resisted

Globalised

Furthermore, in recent translation scholarship there is an increasing emphasis on the collective control and shaping of cultural knowledge. Conolly demonstrates that the western disciplinary perspective reduces and distorts the oral tradition of indigenous African knowledge to such an extent that it loses its original and authentic value.⁹ The exclusion of this oral evidence presents a skewed understanding of knowledge. Nel shows that language practice (and especially translation) has the unique opportunity to break through the covert gate-keeping forces of Eurocentric traditions in order to serve African society and polity.¹⁰ As will be discussed below, traditional proverbs are an important

⁸ See Naudé, “The Cultural Turn in South African Translation: Rehabilitation, Subversion and Resistance,” and idem, “Overcoming Cultural Exclusion.”

⁹ Joan Conolly, “(C)omissions of Perspective, Lens and Worldview: What Africa Can Learn from the ‘Western Mind’ about the Oral Tradition of (Indigenous) Knowledge?” *JNGS* 6/3 (2008): 22-34.

¹⁰ Philip J. Nel, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Language Practice: Interface of a Knowledge Discourse,” *JNGS* 6/3 (2008): 94-108. The role of culture in translation and specifically in South African translations (how translation shapes our knowledge) is being investigated in a research project at the University of the Free State involving approximately ten master students describing existing translations or translations they have made into English, Sesotho, isiXhosa and isiZulu. See, for example, Nanette J. Lötter and Jacobus A. Naudé, “Foreignising as Translation Strategy in Prescribed Books for Second Language Learners,” *Journal for Language Teaching* 38/2 (2004): 230-242.

repository of cultural knowledge. The translation of proverbs, then, must take into account the cultural knowledge of the source culture as well as the cultural knowledge of the target culture.

The remainder of this article explores the notion of the translator as an agent of change and transformation with respect to a very difficult aspect of translation: the translation of biblical proverbs into Sudanese languages.¹¹ Particular attention is paid to Marais's argument concerning strategies for indigenisation / foreignisation and the matter of hegemony in translation.¹²

B STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLATING PROVERBS

Proverbs are exquisitely crafted sayings in which minimal words are arranged for maximal effect. They are shaped so as to be memorable and persuasive, to encourage virtue and discourage vice, but they do so indirectly or even covertly. Proverbial sayings, then, are multi-faceted linguistic expressions in which form and meaning intersect in complex ways and they are thus one of the most difficult kinds of texts to translate.

In order to illustrate the difficulties inherent in the translation of proverbs, it is instructive to attempt to translate a Sudanese proverb into English. The proverb is a traditional proverb from the Dinka people:

Duɔ̃ñë rət ye buɔ̃j̄ apat.

“Do not sit yourself down on a stinging insect.”

The proverb is translated literally with each word rigidly rendered. This approach to translation is what Marais means by “foreignisation.” The Dinka proverb has a foreign character—in fact, it is so foreign that it is impossible to know what course of action the proverb encourages (or discourages). Furthermore, it is not even recognisable as a proverb in English but appears to be a simple (and seemingly simplistic) command.

To understand the proverb, three kinds of interlocking meaning must be explored. The first kind of meaning involves the lexical meaning.¹³ This is the

¹¹ The research on translating biblical proverbs is based on four workshops on translating the biblical book of Proverbs into various languages of Sudan, Nigeria, and Cameroun. For a broader examination of these translation issues, see Cynthia L. Miller, “Translating Biblical Proverbs in African Cultures: Between Form and Meaning,” *The Bible Translator: Technical Papers* 56 (2005): 129–44. We are grateful to Amos Awan de Gak, Peter Malek Ayuel Ring, Emanuel Ayel Deng, Akol Kongoor Reech, and Andrew Mayol Ajak for information concerning Dinka.

¹² Marais, “Language Practitioner as Agent,” 35-47.

¹³ Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 13-17, describes lexical meaning as having four facets: propositional meaning,

most basic level of meaning. At this level, we discover that the word translated “sit yourself down” is a verb that describes what a hen does when it sits on eggs to hatch them. It can also be used of the action that a mother takes when she places her hand on a young child to comfort it. Furthermore, the proverb involves a covert simile—the person is described as sitting on a stinging insect like a hen would sit on eggs to incubate them. Based on a fuller understanding of the lexical meaning of the proverb, we could translate:

Do not sit yourself down (or, sit brooding) on a stinging insect like a hen sits on eggs.

A second level of meaning involves the cultural background and implications of the proverb.¹⁴ Since no one in Dinka culture would actually sit on a stinging insect like a hen sits on eggs, it is immediately obvious that the proverb really involves two interrelated implied metaphors. The first metaphor involves the stinging insect as a problem or difficulty. Because the problem (the target of the metaphor) is not overtly mentioned, the metaphor is only implied rather than explicit. The second metaphor is also an implied metaphor. It involves sitting alone brooding like a hen on the problem, that is, the person is deliberately sitting alone while the problem that they have “hatches” and bites them. The proverb takes the certainty that sitting on a stinging insect results in being stung and maps that certainty onto the uncertain reality that “sitting” on a problem will result in “getting stung” metaphorically as a way to discourage lethargy in dealing with difficulties.¹⁵ Based on a cultural understanding of the implied metaphors in the proverb, we could translate:

Do not sit alone on a growing problem like a hen sits on eggs until they hatch.

A third level of meaning involves the significance or pragmatic functions of the proverb, that is, what the proverb is trying to accomplish in a social sense.¹⁶ The pragmatic function of this proverb is to encourage someone to face the problem that they have while it is a small problem so that it can be solved

expressive meaning, presupposed meaning, and evoked meaning. Geoffrey N. Leech, *Semantics: The Study of Meaning* (London: Penguin, 1981), 9-12, uses the term “conceptual meaning.”

¹⁴ Leech, *Semantics*, 12-13, refers to this kind of meaning as “connotative meaning.”

¹⁵ This analysis of the metaphors in the proverb was supplied by Kevin Chau (personal communication).

¹⁶ Christiane Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained* (Manchester, U.K.: St. Jerome, 1997), 42-45, discusses the appellative (or, conative) function in translation, which she describes as “directed at the receivers’ sensitivity or disposition to act” since it is “designed to induce them to respond in a particular way.” Leech, *Semantics*, 14-16, does not discuss proverbs, but he would include this kind of meaning under the category “social and affective meaning.”

before it becomes a big problem. Based upon the pragmatic function of the proverb, we could translate:

Do not allow a problem to grow bigger by keeping it to yourself and doing nothing about it until it becomes a serious problem that will harm you.

What is interesting is the way in which the pragmatic function of the proverb and the meaning of the metaphor of a brooding hen diverge in seemingly contradictory ways. While the action of the hen in sitting on eggs until they hatch is an appropriate action and has a positive result, the action of the person who sits on the problem is inappropriate and will have a negative result. The inherent contradictions in the literal and metaphorical senses of the proverb serve to lead the hearer to realise that their action is inappropriate and ultimately self-destructive. With this understanding, we could translate:

Do not allow a small problem to incubate (or, do not incubate a small problem) until it becomes a serious problem which destroys you.

Furthermore, the pragmatic function of the Dinka proverb implicitly extols the virtues of community as opposed to individualism. Based upon this nuance of the proverb, we could translate:

Take your problem to the community for help in solving it when it is small, so that it does not become a big problem that will harm you.

Thus far, an explanation of the various layers of meaning of the proverb has revealed a multitude of choices for translation with corresponding advantages and disadvantages. A word-for-word translation using a strict foreignisation strategy would be appropriate for an academic book in which representing the specific shape of the proverb is important. However, in order to understand the meaning and function of the proverb, it would need to be accompanied by a lengthy paragraph which would unpack its various levels of linguistic and cultural meaning, as was provided above. A foreignisation strategy, however, would not be useful if one wanted an English speaker to understand the pragmatic meaning of the proverb, or even to recognise the proverb as a proverb. Still less could such a translated proverb be used as an English proverb to encourage someone to avoid procrastination in dealing with their problem.

A second option is to produce a fuller, more explicit translation that spells out one or more features of the cultural background of the proverb and/or its pragmatic function, as was done at each step of analysis above. As useful as such explanatory statements are in bridging the gap between the source culture and the target culture, none of them sounds like a proverb in English and thus none could function as a proverb. English proverbs are usually short and concise, and contain some kind of quasi-poetic features such as similar sound pat-

terns, repetition, and rhythm. For example, the contemporary English proverb “No pain, no gain” is shaped in a particular way. There is repetition of the word “no” and the rhyme of “pain” and “gain;” it is also very concise. Compare the shape of the proverb with an explication of its cultural implications and pragmatic functions:

You must be willing to invest your time, talents, energy, or resources in a proposed endeavour. If you don’t, then you will not get any positive results from your efforts.

Although such an explanation makes explicit all of the cultural and pragmatic layers of meaning within the proverb, the result is not in itself a proverb – a proverb must be concise and have some kind of rhyme or similar sounds. To translate the Dinka proverb in a way that allows the translated proverb to be used as a proverb in English, the proverb must be shaped like an English proverb; that is, it must be indigenised.

A third way, then, to translate involves indigenising the proverb so that it takes on the linguistic shape of a proverb in the target language and culture, while translating some aspects of the source proverb’s meaning. For example, on the pattern of the English proverb “no pain, no gain” we could translate:

No procrastination, no escalation.

This translation does not explicitly mention the topic of the proverb, namely, the problem. By leaving the topic covert, the translation employs another feature of good proverbial style. Alternatively, one could translate using the pattern of “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” as follows:

A problem denied becomes magnified.

Both of these translations focus on representing the pragmatic function of the Dinka proverb in English proverbial form, without making any attempt to represent the original proverb’s lexemes or its cultural background. Instead, the Dinka proverb has been indigenised to such an extent that only its pragmatic function remains in English.

Another way to indigenise involves the complete substitution of an indigenous English proverb that conveys approximately the same pragmatic sense for the Dinka proverb. The closest traditional English proverb is:

A stitch in time saves nine.

This proverb conveys the idea that if one has a torn garment (the covert metaphor for a problem), it should be mended quickly and easily before it becomes a bigger tear (or, problem) that is much more difficult to repair. The pragmatic function of the English proverb is thus remarkably similar to that of the Dinka proverb, even though the lexical meaning and the cultural meanings are diver-

gent.¹⁷ However, in gaining complete indigenisation, the shape and metaphors of the source proverb have been simultaneously completely lost, along with its cultural flavour. Furthermore, the multiple pragmatic functions of the Dinka proverb have been constrained to only those of the English proverb. While the Dinka proverb and the English proverb have overlapping pragmatic functions, they are not precisely identical. The Dinka proverb contains the cultural implication that if the problem cannot be solved by the person alone, s/he must take it to the community. This idea is completely missing in the English proverb. In addition, the lexical meaning of the Dinka proverb contributes the idea that the person is deliberately “sitting on” their problem and “incubating it” rather than dealing with it; this idea is also absent from the English proverb. Thus, indigenisation that involves the total substitution of an indigenous proverb is indigenisation only with respect to some of the meanings of the original proverb.

A final option for indigenisation involves using a traditional proverb in the target language, but subverting it so that it conveys the cultural values and pragmatic function of the original proverb. This is extraordinarily difficult, since it depends upon the proverbial resources of the target culture. In translating the Dinka proverb discussed here, there does not seem to be a comparable English proverb that can be used for this purpose. So to illustrate this kind of indigenisation, another Dinka proverb must be used. The proverb is: *R̄kē ran acē cīr r̄kē koou* “A fence of people is not like a fence of thorns.” The proverb highlights the importance of the community (the metaphorical “fence of people”) in providing security that is superior to the physical “fence of thorns” that surrounds the compound.¹⁸ A subversive indigenisation strategy of translation can employ a traditional English proverb that combines the notions of fences and neighbours:

¹⁷ At least two additional Dinka proverbs share the general pragmatic function of the English proverb, though they are shaped differently. One says, *Raan, lεrē bith jīēēj* “O man, take the fishing spear to the public.” This proverb originates in a story about a man who had a fishing spear. The head of the spear kept falling off of the shaft into the river. Finally, the man’s wife urged him to take the spear to the people to repair it. The proverb highlights the importance of the community in solving problems. Another proverb says, *Kā tō’ tēhīōk aa kōc jāc* “Things existing nearby splash back onto people.” This proverb says that situations that are happening to your neighbors will affect you, so it is important to be involved with them. It differs from the other Dinka proverbs discussed here in that the situations involved may be either positive as well as negative. The proverb emphasises the interconnectedness of the community for good or ill.

¹⁸ For a more detailed explanation of this proverb and ways to translate it, see Miller, “Translating Biblical Proverbs in African Cultures: Between Form and Meaning.”

Good fences make good neighbours.

The English proverb reflects the cultural value that having clear boundaries to separate one's property from one's neighbours will prevent quarrels with them. A subversive indigenisation strategy would involve modifying the English proverb to reflect the world view and pragmatic function of the Dinka proverb by reversing it:

Good neighbours make good fences.

This translated proverb sounds like a proverb in that it is short and concise and has repetition. It also evokes the traditional proverb, but subverts it by reversing the equivalencies. The pragmatic function and significance of the proverb are covert, requiring the hearer to think twice about what has been heard and what it means. This translation achieves almost complete indigenisation, while simultaneously subverting the traditional English proverb and its cultural background. However, once again, the pragmatic functions of the translated proverb are more constrained than the original Dinka proverb, in that it could not easily be used to discourage individualism; instead, the most likely pragmatic function would be to encourage cordial relationships with neighbours as a source of security.

As we have seen, the translation of proverbs involves multiple considerations. No translated proverb can achieve all that the original proverb does, nor can it do so in such an elegant, yet cryptic, way. Any translation involves choices and trade-offs that are quite complex and that go beyond a simple binary choice between foreignisation and indigenisation. Even indigenisation is not a monolithic strategy, but instead may take any number of forms with correspondingly different effects.

C TRANSLATING BIBLICAL PROVERBS

All of these considerations come into play when we consider translation of biblical proverbs into Sudanese languages. Let us consider the biblical proverb in Proverbs 11:25 (NRSV):

A generous person will be enriched; and the one who gives water will get water.

The biblical proverb is shaped as two parallel statements. The first statement is general: a generous person will in turn be enriched. The second statement echoes the meaning of the first statement, but provides a specific illustration: the one who gives water will get water.

In translating the proverb into Dinka, it is first important to note that it is somewhat clumsy to translate the two parallel statements. So one possibility for indigenisation is to condense the two statements into one, as was done in the Dinka Cam dialect:

Proverbs 11:25 (Dinka Cam translation): *Raan nɔŋ piɔ̃ ye kɔc miɔc, aye miɔc ɛya*. “The person who has a heart and gives to people generously is generously given to.”

Here the only parallel expressions involve the expansion of the notion of generosity into “has a heart” and “gives generously.”

The Dinka Rek translators, however, found a way to keep the two parallel statements from the Hebrew. They translated:

Miɔc yen eeya jiɛk ku na ye amiöc ke yin abi ya muɔc. It is the gift which is the wealth and if you are a giver, then you will be given.

The first sentence characterises “a gift” as “wealth.” The second part confirms the first part that if someone is generous in giving, then they will be rewarded.

Another possibility for indigenisation would be to substitute a traditional Dinka proverb that encourages the same behaviour for the biblical proverb. A number of traditional Dinka proverbs contain the same sentiment. One of their proverbs says:

Atueldun ca cuat tueŋ aye bɛñ la yök. The stick that you throw ahead is found.

This proverb draws a picture to describe the reciprocal nature of actions. When a person throws a stick ahead while walking, it will be found again—what a person does has a future effect. But closer parallels to the wording of the biblical proverb are found in variant versions of another Dinka proverb:

Cin lɔ ku cin buɔ̃. The hand goes, and the hand comes.

Abiny lɔ ku abiny buɔ̃. The bowl goes, and the bowl comes.

The proverb means: “The person who gives food (with his hand or in a bowl), will in turn receive food when he is in need.” In translating Proverbs 11:25, the Dinka Padang translators were able to use this phraseology in the second half of the proverb:

The person who gives, prospers, for the bowl goes and the bowl comes (*nɛ abiny lɔ ku abiny buɔ̃*).

Notice that the translators kept the first general statement of the biblical proverb, while combining it with a second specific statement that incorporated their traditional proverb. The Dinka who hear the biblical proverb are more likely to understand it as a proverb, since it approximates the shape of a traditional proverb and in fact incorporates a traditional proverb within it. At the other end of the spectrum, a word-for-word foreignisation strategy would be heard by the

Dinka as two statements and not as a proverb. To the extent that the purpose of a Bible translation is to impact the culture, a foreignisation strategy would not be preferable.¹⁹

At the same time, it is important to observe the quite serious differences of opinion within the Dinka Christian community concerning whether or not it is appropriate to employ an indigenisation strategy that utilises traditional Dinka proverbs in the translation of the Bible.

Of the Dinka dialect translations discussed here, the Dinka Padang translators, who are primarily from the Presbyterian Church of the Sudan and Sudan Interior Church, were most amenable to the use of traditional proverbs in their translation. The Dinka Rek translators, who are from the Catholic Church, were open to the incorporation of traditional proverbs into their translation, but felt that in the case of Proverbs 11:25, the notion of generosity was important in the biblical text and was lacking in their traditional proverb. Their translation was also influenced by their concern to connect Proverbs 11:25 to the preceding context in verse 24.

By contrast, the Dinka Cam translators, who are from the Episcopal Church of the Sudan, wanted to shape the form of the translated biblical proverbs according to the norms of Dinka traditional proverbs through the use of short, concise proverbs with extensive imagery, but they did not want to go so far in an indigenisation strategy as to incorporate traditional Dinka proverbs into biblical proverbs. They believed that even though the Dinka proverbs were often equivalent in meaning and pragmatic function to the biblical proverbs, it was inappropriate to give traditional proverbs the status of Scripture. Translation consultants must respect the opinion of the respective mother-tongue translators and their communities with respect to the kind of indigenisation strategy that they consider to be appropriate.

But it is important to note that both approaches to translation of proverbs involved the translator as an agent of change and transformation. In the case where traditional proverbs were incorporated into the biblical proverbs, the translator became an agent of change by validating traditional cultural wisdom as sacred text. In the case where traditional proverbs were not used, but the translated proverbs had the shape of indigenous proverbs, the translator became an agent by change by putting the biblical proverbs into a traditional, culturally

¹⁹ Contemporary English translations that purport to pursue an indigenisation strategy have not always produced good proverbial English style. Compare: “Generosity will be rewarded: give a cup of water; and you will receive a cup of water in return” (*Contemporary English Version*); “The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed; those who help others are helped” (*The Message*).

acceptable shape which would allow them to become incorporated into the Dinka culture as if they were indigenous Dinka proverbs.

It is interesting in this connection to consider the fact that the incorporation of traditional wisdom into sacred text occurred in biblical times also. Ancient Israel incorporated traditional wisdom sayings into its compilation of the Book of Proverbs, which was itself later accepted into the canon of the Jewish Scriptures.

It is quite clear that many of the proverbs in the Book of Proverbs have their origin in everyday observations about Israelite life and culture and are not really “religious” or “sacred” in any sense of the term.

Proverbs 17:22: A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.

Even more strikingly, ancient Israel incorporated into their Book of Proverbs non-Israelite proverbial expressions, especially Egyptian proverbs:²⁰

Proverbs 15:16-17: Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it. Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it.

Instruction of Amen-em-opet (Egyptian, 7th-6th c.a. B.C.E.): Better is poverty in the hand of the god than riches in a storehouse; Better is bread, when the heart is happy, than riches with sorrow.

Whatever the precise literary relationship between Egyptian wisdom literature (especially Amenemope’s Instructions) and the Book of Proverbs, the similarities in motifs and structures are undeniable.²¹ In other words, ancient Israel indigenised Egyptian proverbs and incorporated them into their own repertoire of wise sayings.

Finally, an observation about English translations of the biblical Book of Proverbs is in order. In general, most modern translations make no effort to translate using the shape of proverbs in English, that is, by employing rhyme, word play, and compact statements to imitate the shape of traditional English proverbs. However, a few very successful renditions of biblical proverbs have

²⁰ The translation of the Egyptian proverbs is from James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed. with supplement; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 422. For an extensive treatment of the Egyptian wisdom literature, see William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 51-150.

²¹ Emerton re-examined the question of the literary relationship between Egyptian wisdom literature and Proverbs; see John A. Emerton, “The Teaching of Amenemope and Proverbs xxii 17-xxiv 22: Further Reflections on a Long-standing Problem.” *VT* 51 (2001): 431-465.

entered English as proverbs in their own right to such an extent that their biblical origin is often not recognised. Chief among these is Proverbs 13:24.²² The Hebrew literally says:

Proverbs 13:24 [Hebrew]: The one who spares his rod hates his son; and the one who loves him, seeks for him reproof.

The *New Revised Standard Version*, a formal translation, translates:

Proverbs 13:24 (*New Revised Standard Version*): Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.

The New Living Translation, translates:

Proverbs 13:24 (*New Living Translation*): Those who spare the rod of discipline hate their children. Those who love their children care enough to discipline them.

In English popular culture, however, the biblical proverb has been indigenised into the shape of an English proverb:

Spare the rod and spoil the child.

Note the concise wording in that the two lines of the biblical proverb have been condensed into one. There is also sound play between the contrastive halves: *spare* and *spoil* both begin with *sp*; and both halves are grammatically identical, consisting only of an imperative *spare/spoil* and an object *the rod/the child*. This is excellent proverbial form in English. Although a foreignisation strategy as followed by, for example, the NRSV portrays accurately the shape of the original biblical proverb, only the indigenous adaptation of the proverb can function as a proverb in modern English. And yet no major English translation translates Proverbs 13:24 as “spare the rod and spoil the child.”²³

D CONCLUSIONS

A translator has a multitude of options available for translation, but any choice involves the translator as an agent of change and transformation. These possibilities and challenges are especially acute in the translation of proverbs. Differing strategies of foreignisation and indigenisation produce different kinds of

²² The following discussion profited from the discussion of Robert Alter, “The Poetry of Wit,” in *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (ed. Robert Alter, New York: Basic Books, 1985), 166-167.

²³ Compare the following: “A refusal to correct is a refusal to love; love your children by disciplining them” (*The Message*); “If you love your children, you will correct them; if you don’t love them, you won’t correct them” (*Contemporary English Version*).

translations, which, on the one hand, may fulfil differing needs within the community, and which, on the other hand, effect different kinds of change.

A foreignisation strategy recreates the cultural and social world of the original proverb and is particularly useful for someone interested in the metaphors and idioms of the original language.²⁴ A translation of biblical proverbs that mimics the form of the original Hebrew could be useful for teaching students who do not read Hebrew how to recover the network of meanings within the biblical text.²⁵ It would also be useful for gaining understanding about the socio-cultural background of ancient Israel. But foreignisation also serves a social and perhaps ideological function in that it simultaneously prevents the original proverb from entering into the language of translation *as a proverb*.

An indigenisation strategy of translation produces proverbs that “sound like” proverbs after they are translated and thus they could be used as proverbs to influence social behaviour. The translator becomes an agent of change by carefully crafting new proverbial expressions which, it is hoped, will catch on as proverbs in the language of translation. There are a variety of indigenisation strategies that can be employed. Some translators will be willing to incorporate traditional proverbial saying into their translation, thus empowering and validating traditional wisdom. But other translators will be unwilling to take indigenisation to that extent and will instead struggle to produce as nearly as possible a proverb that sounds like a traditional proverb.

An examination of the translation of a biblical proverb by three groups of Dinka translators highlighted some of the issues concerning indigenisation strategy and the degree to which language communities are willing to accept the incorporation of traditional proverbs into the translation of biblical proverbs. Interestingly, by either indigenisation strategy the three teams of Dinka translators discussed here are light years ahead of the myriad of English translations. Most English versions, even modern versions (e.g. the NRSV), employ foreignisation rather than indigenisation in the translation of proverbs. Furthermore, those English versions which purport to use an indigenisation strategy as a general translation principle (e.g. the NLT, CEV) nonetheless refuse to employ a traditional English proverb (“spare the rod and spoil the child”) in

²⁴ Catherine Sumner-Paulin, “Traduction et culture: quelques proverbes africains traduits.” *Meta* 40 (1995): 548-555, argues that because proverbs reflect the cultural system and social organization of a community, they should be “transcoded” (i.e. translated literally) in order to recreate the atmosphere and cognitive world of the original proverb.

²⁵ This argument is laid out by Michael V. Fox, “Translation and Mimesis,” in *Translation in Context* (ed. F.W. Knobloch, Bethesda: University of Maryland Press, 2001), 207-220, who calls this kind of translation “mimetic.”

their translation of Proverbs 13:24, even though the traditional proverb had its very origin in the biblical text.

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Professor Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé, Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. *E-mail*: millercl@ufs.ac.za

Professor J.A. Naudé, Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. *E-mail*: naudej@ufs.ac.za