

# COMMENTS ON BAHÁ'Í TRANSLATION BY MR HUSHMAND FAT'HE-AAZAM

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*Mr Hushmand Fat'he-Aazam, Workshop on Writing sponsored by the African Bahá'í Study Group at the Bahá'í World Centre, 21 February 1998.*

## **Publication is a tool of Teaching Activities**

“Publication is a tool of teaching activities. If we do not have this tool, the efforts offered in the teaching work are wasted.”

## **Publishing and Indigenous Culture**

“We have to decide about literature according to the cultures of each country and people.”

“We should not blindly translate or publish a book from other areas so that the people of that country will not see the Faith as something foreign.”

“If you are an author, or you are modifying a book, you should try to include the folklore, stories and fables which everybody knows in that country.”

“Bahá'ís go to a village, teach, give a number of books and pamphlets. But, the people cannot read, and those that can read are not readers. You need to leave behind a tape or a number of tapes that contain obligatory prayers and several Hidden Words and let them repeat and repeat, and in this way the consolidation work will be facilitated.”

## **Translations**

“The language of the translations of the Writings [i.e. of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá] should be exalted and sublime as it is in the original. Even though the local people cannot understand it immediately, you can help them to understand it by explaining or simplifying the thought in the footnotes. Help them to understand, but do not dilute the Writings. For example, we should not dilute the obligatory prayers into simple newspaper language just because the people will understand it better. You must make it as sublime as possible, because when the people recite the obligatory prayer it should be as sublime and exalted as possible. That has more effect. But, naturally, they should understand what they are reading.”

“Introductory books . . . must be quite simple.”

*(Mr Fat'he-Aazam explained that in the early days of translating Bahá'í literature the Guardian emphasised the need to get the work published as quickly and efficiently as possible and not to worry too much about the quality. Mr Fat'he-Aazam commented that some of the early translation efforts were terrible but they were the best that could be done at the time and if they had not been done opportunities to get literature into the hands of the people would have been lost.)*

**Non-Bahá'í Translators:** Can be used if we don't have sufficiently qualified Bahá'í translators, but:

“. . . You have to have a qualified, deepened Bahá'í to help him [the non-Bahá'í translator] understand the meaning. When deepened Bahá'ís . . . read the translation and compare it with English, you will detect a number of things which the non-Bahá'í cannot detect and you can discuss this with him.”

# TRANSLATION: POINTS TO CONSIDER

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## 1. HOW MUCH CARE AND TIME DO WE SPEND ON A TRANSLATION?

How much effort and time is put into a translation can be influenced by considering the following points:

- ▶ How many people are going to read this translation?
- ▶ How many times will the translation be read?
- ▶ If the translation is going to be published, how much money is involved?
- ▶ Is it a translation of the Holy Text, or of works by the Guardian or the Universal House of Justice, or of a book or pamphlet written by an individual believer?
- ▶ If it is a Holy Text, are people going to memorize it or study it word-by-word?
- ▶ How urgent is it to get this translation into the hands of the believers (e.g. the compilation on Ḥuqúqu'lláh)?
- ▶ Is this one of the first translations into this language or is it either a revision of a previous translation or an addition to a reasonable amount of already available literature?

A major publication may have to go through eight or more drafts before reaching an acceptable level of accuracy and clarity, each draft representing a progressive refinement of the translation. A translation needed quickly for a newsletter may only go through one draft.

## 2. WHAT SHOULD BE TRANSLATED?

From the letters of the Guardian, an order of priority for translations could be suggested as follows:

**First:** at least a pamphlet.

**Second:** an introductory book, such as Baha'u'llah and the New Era.

**Third:** A compilation of Holy Writings extracted from various books.

**Fourth:** Complete books, such as the Kitáb-i-Íqán.

The Guardian stressed that in the early stages the priority is to get the literature published, without worrying too much about the refinement of the translation. However, by the fourth stage, publishing complete books, the Guardian stressed the need for complete faithfulness to the original text.

## 3. GETTING THE TRANSLATIONS TO THE BELIEVERS

### **Print small numbers of partially completed translations:**

If translations are taking forever and nothing looks like ever being finished, why wait? With computers and modern publishing it is possible to make, say, 200 booklets of what has been done so far – even if it is not perfect.

### **Distribution is an integral element of Bahá'í translation and publishing:**

A National Assembly must have in place a vigorous policy of distributing and selling translated publications, otherwise the efforts of the translators will have been in vain.

#### 4. INSTITUTES, WORD-BY-WORD STUDY & MEMORIZATION OF THE HOLY TEXTS

As the Faith has developed, a new consideration has arisen which has an important bearing on translation work: institutes involving word-by-word study and memorization of the Holy Texts.

An ‘approximate’ translation of the Writings may have been adequate when the need was to get at least something into the hands of the believers as quickly as possible. What would this mean, however, if these translations were used in an institute?

- ▶ Word-by-word study of the mistakes and limitations of the translators!
- ▶ Memorization of passages from the Writings which have had their power diluted by the limitations of the translation.

#### 5. STYLE OF LANGUAGE

##### Vocabulary to be avoided in translations of the Holy Writings:

- ▶ Slang & colloquial usage.
- ▶ Foreign words when an indigenous word or phrase is available.
- ▶ Newly coined words when an old-fashioned word is perfectly acceptable.

##### Vocabulary to be used in the Holy Writings:

Always use the best vocabulary and grammar you can. This usually means using a lot of old-fashioned words that may not be well-known today. Put a glossary at the back of the publication to explain what these words mean.

Use poetic idioms and forms of the African language that may not have any exact equivalents in English but which convey the beauty of the Writings. For example:

*ENGLISH*: “. . . each holding aloft a chalice of pure light”

*SETSWANA*: “. . . each holding aloft a cup of light, the light saying ‘*twaa!*’” This form of grammatical construction is called an ideophone; it has no parallel in English but it exactly conveys the intention of the English. “Pure light” in Setswana would come out as “clean light” which isn’t really the meaning. Light which says ‘*twaa!*’ is light that is bursting forth with brilliance.

#### 6. DIALECT & ORTHOGRAPHY:

Other questions to consider are:

- ▶ What dialect of the language should be used, assuming there are regional dialectic variations?
- ▶ What orthography should be used, assuming there is not a standard orthography?

#### 7. THE GOAL OF A TRANSLATION OF THE HOLY TEXTS:

*Striking a balance between:*

*Faithful*  
*Accurate*  
*Complete*  
*Nothing added*

v.

*Understandable*  
*Idiomatic*  
*Beautiful*  
*Spiritual*

# TRANSLATION: PROJECT MANAGEMENT

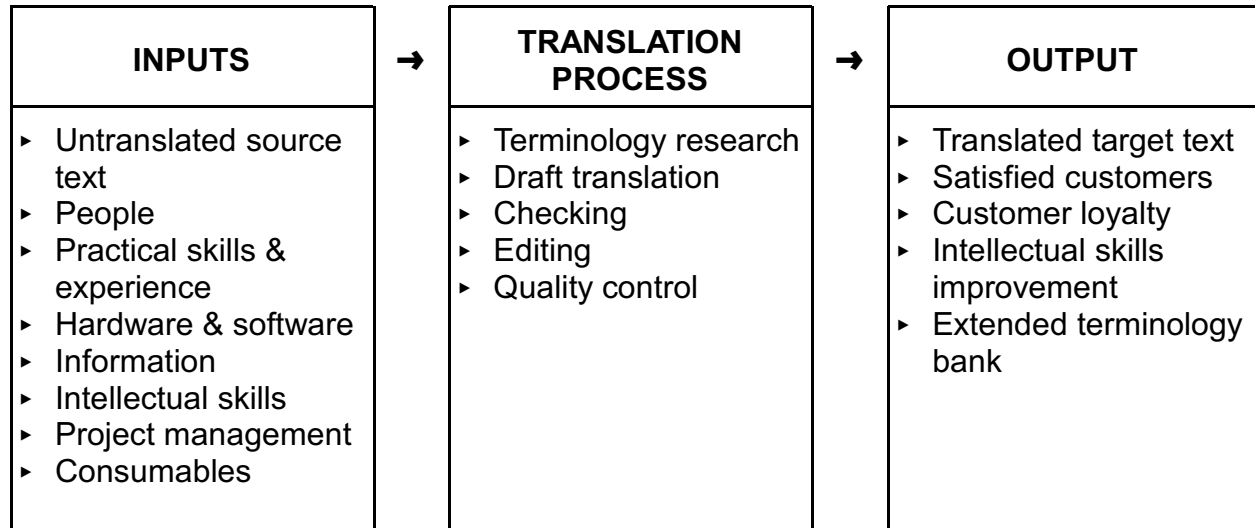
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## 1. TRANSLATION AS A SYSTEMS MODEL

### A Transformation Model for A Translation Operation

Adapted from: The Translator's Handbook *by* Morry Sofer



## 2. QUALITY CONTROL

1. Has all the text been translated?
2. Has the text been spell-checked?
3. Does the target text read like a piece of the original text in that language? Or can you recognize the source language in the structure and syntax?

We might think of the meaning of a text as the notes of a musical score. Every conductor will bring a different idea about tempo, attack, instrumentation, etc., to bear on the performance of those notes. All listeners with some musical training will objectively agree when certain notes are missed or wrongly played in a given performance; so too, those steeped in both the target and source language of a translation will know when the translator has got the meaning wrong. However, a large part of the quality of a rendition of a piece of music pertains to tone and tempo, qualities which belong more to the realm of taste and style than to the realm of meaning and error. Even where the composer has left guidelines, style is never pre-determined. “Allegro,” “pianissimo,” and “con espressione” do not mean the same thing for every conductor or every listener. The same holds true for translation.

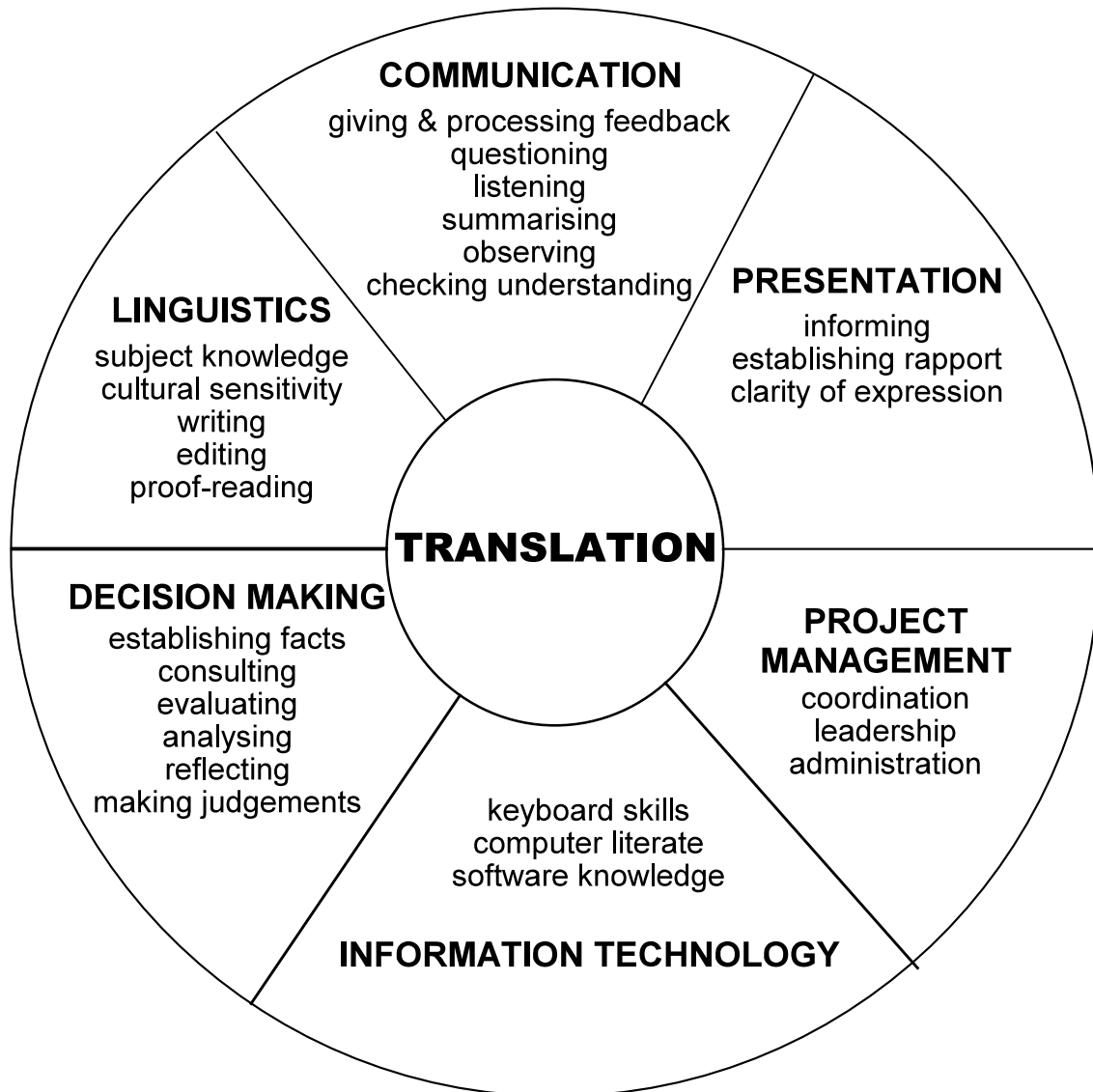
*Franklin Lewis: Bahá'í Studies Review, Volume 8, 1998*

A good translation is like a well-made road: a driver enjoys the journey and does not think about who made the road. When the road is rough and full of pot-holes, however, the driver's attention is now directed towards whoever is responsible for making the road.

*Participant at a Bahá'í translation seminar, Addis Ababa, 1999*

### 3. SKILLS USED IN TRANSLATION

Adapted from: The Translator's Handbook by Morry Sofer



#### REFERENCE MATERIALS

1. Bilingual & monolingual dictionaries.
2. Glossaries.
3. The Internet.
4. Cooperation with clients and other translators.
5. Recognised experts in, or speakers of, the source language & the target language.

#### SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TRANSLATIONS & TRANSLATORS

1. Anyone who can speak English and Setswana can translate.
2. A good translator gets it right first time without the need for any editing or proof-reading.
3. A good translator doesn't need to refer to dictionaries or other reference materials.

#### 4. SKILLS AND QUALITIES NEEDED BY A TRANSLATOR

##### **Flexibility**

- different styles for different clients / texts
- knowing when to stop
- different clients' requirements
- different translations at the same time
- urgent vs. non-urgent
- not a 9 to 5 job
- using downtime
- flexibility of mind and attitude

##### **Motivation**

- translating for its own sake
- language and differences between them
- problem-solving
- finding good solutions and a job well done
- making the effort

##### **Initiative**

- being proactive rather than reactive
- checking
- consulting the author or a subject expert

##### **Confidence / assertiveness**

- being willing to question things
- you have expertise
- charge appropriately
- ask questions and make suggestions
- unclear ST
- accept criticism

##### **Educating the client**

- what your work involves
- machine/computer translation
- explaining 'changes'
- meet your client's expectations BUT...
- the client may not know exactly what he/she wants
- a good translation is a good investment
- not just anyone can translate!
- who judges the quality of your translation

##### **Learn to say 'no'**

- don't take on a job you know you can't do
- be willing to explain why
- if you say no, try to recommend someone

##### **Stamina and persistence**

- 5-8 pages a day / 2000+ words / 12000 characters
- 7-8 hours + per day
- tiring work
- isolation
- coping with pressure
- being able to work quickly and absorb new information

##### **Time management**

- assessing how long things will take
- don't take people's word for things
- seeing the text
- beware extras
- access to non-textual elements
- is the ST likely to change?
- start and end dates
- short timeline, specific time
- stick to deadlines
- learn to prioritise
- changing the ST

##### **Organisational skills**

- backup copies
- records
- business records
- glossaries
- errors, problems, solutions
- teamwork
- putting things in writing

##### **Customer care and communication skills**

- establishing rapport
- ask questions
- keep to deadlines
- don't be afraid to ask questions
- errors in ST
- show an interest
- what 'added value' can you offer?
- ask for feedback
- ask them to recommend you
- polish your telephone and email skills
- be clear and to the point
- good service
- word-of-mouth

## Translation: Project Management - page 4

### Networking

- other translators and language revisers
- giving recommendations
- passing on work
- gatherings of translators
- be generous

### Research skills

- dictionaries, reference books, Internet, people
- specialist subject knowledge

### Computer skills

- word processing
- security & virus protection
- backing-up

### Interlinguistic and intercultural awareness

- generic and text conventions
- cultural differences
- reader expectations
- putting yourself in an outsider's shoes
- explicitation and implicitation

### Writing, language revision, checking

- translating is writing
- reading
- translation revision and native speakers
- swap texts with a colleague
- print out for checking
- when to check
- look for specific things:
  - accuracy
  - consistency
  - spelling
  - punctuation
  - grammar
  - word order
  - cohesion
  - generic features
  - stylistic features
- making global changes
- importance of context
- checking your changes
- wider impact of changes

# BOOKLIST FOR BAHÁ'Í TRANSLATORS

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## 1. ENGLISH DICTIONARIES:

Many errors in past translations have arisen because the translators did not properly understand the meaning of the English words. Native English speakers, in particular, should not assume that they know the correct meaning of a word just because it is in their own language (what do the terms “a goodly reward”, “the wayward”, “ungodly” and “magnified be Thy name” mean, for instance?). It is always safer to check. However, even the best dictionary definitions have their limitations: see “*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*” on the next page.

It is a good idea to have two authoritative dictionaries available. There are two dictionaries that are widely regarded as being the most reliable authorities of the English language: the Oxford Dictionary and Webster’s Dictionary. The abridged versions of these dictionaries are essential for Bahá’í translation work:

- ▶ The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English
- ▶ Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary

Sometimes the definitions for a particular word given in one of these dictionaries just don’t seem to cover the way that word is used by the Guardian. Turn to another dictionary and you often find what you are looking for. (Although, not infrequently, the Guardian will use a word in a masterful and perhaps novel way that is covered by *neither* dictionary. Refer to “*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*” again!)

If you are rich enough, then the serious translator should consider purchasing the larger editions of these dictionaries:

- ▶ Webster’s New International Dictionary (a version of which was used by the Guardian)
- ▶ The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (‘shorter’ being somewhat misleading, as this dictionary comprises two massive volumes)

## 2. A THESAURUS

When you can’t think what the African equivalent could possibly be for a certain English noun, verb or adjective, try searching for synonyms in a Thesaurus. Synonyms enable the translator to look at the original word from different angles. The appropriate African word is often brought to mind in this way.

*Roget’s Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*: definitely the best Thesaurus available, but can be rather complicated to use. There are other, simpler Thesauruses available from different publishers.

## 3. A CONCORDANCE TO THE BIBLE

Thanks to the pioneering work of Christian missionaries, the Holy Bible is available in many African languages. Use a Concordance to the Bible (‘*Cruden’s Concordance*’ is the standard one) to find out how the Bible translators tackled the translation of a certain word. Many words appearing in Bahá’í Holy Writings are also used in the Bible. First look up the required word in the Concordance and note some of its Biblical references. Now check these references in the ‘African’ translation of the Bible to see how the word has been translated there. Use the English Bible if necessary to check the original context of the word. As there are many versions of the Bible in English, you will also need the English version of the Bible used by the translators (most likely it will be the 1885 Revised English Version). Don’t be bound by Bible translations, though. Great as they were, the early Bible translators did not have the privilege of turning to Bahá’u’lláh and beseeching His assistance. Bahá’í translators can sometimes *improve* the work of these pioneers.



#### 4. "THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE"

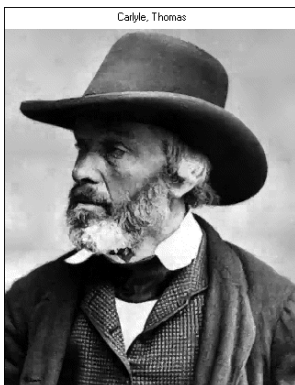
A dictionary alone is not enough to enable a translator to grasp the varied nuances and shades of meaning of English vocabulary. The varieties of usage and range of meaning of any particular word are best appreciated by seeing that word used in the context of English literature. Conscientious translators should immerse themselves in those works of classical English literature that will better enable them to extract the full significance from Shoghi Effendi's choice and use of words.

Why "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire"? Here is an extract from *The Priceless Pearl* by Rúhiyyih Khanum, pages 37-8:

From his Beirut days until practically the end of his life Shoghi Effendi had the habit of writing vocabularies and typical English phrases in notebooks. Hundreds of words and sentences have been recorded and these clearly indicate the years of careful study and he put into mastering a language he loved and revelled in. For him there was no second to English. He was a great reader of King James version of the Bible, and of the historians Carlyle and Gibbon, whose style he greatly admired, particularly that of Gibbon whose *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Shoghi Effendi was so fond of that I never remember his not having a volume of it near him in his small room and usually with him when he travelled. There was a small Everyman's copy of part of it next to his bed when he died. It was his own pet bible of the English language and often he would read to me excerpts from it, interrupting himself with exclamations such as "Oh what style; what a command of English; what rolling sentences; listen to this." With his beautiful voice and pronunciation - in the direction of what we call an "Oxford accent", but no exaggeratedly so - the words fairly glowed with colour and their value and meaning came out like shining jewels. I particularly remember one peaceful hour (so rare, alas) when we sat on a bench facing the lake on a summer afternoon in St James' Park in London and he read me Gibbon out loud. He revelled in him and throughout Shoghi Effendi's writings the influence of his style may clearly be seen, just as the biblical English is reflected in his translations of Bahá'u'lláh's Prayers, The Hidden Words and Tablets.

The books and authors mentioned in this passage are:

*The Holy Bible, The Authorized (King James) version, 1611*: This is very difficult to get hold of these days, having been largely replaced by more modern versions with improved translations. The original version, however, cannot be matched for the conciseness and beauty of its English.



Thomas Carlyle: Scottish essayist, social critic, and historian 1795-1881. His book *The French Revolution* is available as a Penguin Classic.

Edward Gibbon: one of the greatest English historians 1737-1794. His masterpiece is the massive six-volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Penguin Classics publish an abridged version.



## 5. IMPROVE YOUR ENGLISH

As well as reading works of English literature, there are many other books by eminent English and American authors that Bahá'í translators can read to improve their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary:

- ▶ *The Kings English* by HW & FG Fowler. The standard by which all other books on correct English usage are judged.
- ▶ *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* by HW Fowler (Oxford). The standard reference work. Full of sensible advice.
- ▶ *Usage and Abusage* by Eric Partridge (Penguin). A useful adjunct to the above volume.

## 6. AFRICAN LANGUAGES

What you read depends upon what is available, but the more you read the better. For the word 'African' below, substitute the language you are translating into:

- ▶ 'African'-English Dictionary: Any that are available are essential to have. Like all dictionaries, of course, they must be used with care and use of one's own knowledge.
- ▶ Books of 'African' grammar and orthography.
- ▶ The Bible in 'African'. The Bible in their own language is a treasured source of literature to many Africans. It is often the only book that is read. If the translation was done in the last century it may contain archaic words no longer used conversationally today—words that can be very useful to Bahá'í translators as they will bring a sense of reverence and respect to the translation.
- ▶ Recognised works of literature in the language. Earlier works often contain purer grammar and vocabulary, untainted by modern trends. In some countries there is so little literature written in the language that any author, no matter how bad, can get something published if he or she writes in the vernacular: avoid such works.
- ▶ Newspapers and magazines: Improve your African language by reading columnists who have an excellent grasp of the language. At the same time, newspapers often are a good source of unnecessary new words, slang and poor grammar that Bahá'í translators should note and ensure that they avoid in their own work.

## 7. ORAL TRADITION

Learn from your elders! No matter how much written literature there is in most African languages, probably less than half of the vocabulary has ever been written down. The 'missing' half of the vocabulary mostly resides in the minds of old people. When they go, so does part of the language. Consultation with elders who are recognized as being refined speakers of the language is a great aid to Bahá'í translators. The Bahá'í Writings in an African language will rescue many words from extinction. Elders can also give their opinion as to the clarity, beauty and grammatical correctness of draft translations.

## **8. NOTEBOOK**

Get into the habit of carrying a small notebook around with you. It is surprising how often you will hear a word being used, perhaps one you had not thought of before or were unfamiliar with, and suddenly realise that it is the answer to the translation problem you have been wrestling with. Write it down before you forget it!

## **9. THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS**

The more you study all the Bahá'í Writings available to you, the more you will understand what you are translating. The translation of a difficult passage can sometimes be solved by reference to other passages in the Writings which illuminate a problem you are having.

# METAPHOR IN BAHÁ'Í TRANSLATION

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## SOME TECHNICAL TERMS:

**METAPHOR:** applying a name, descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. E.g. “*the prince of all goodly deeds . . .*”

**FIGURATIVE:** metaphorical, not literal. E.g. “*I have wakened in Thy shelter . . .*”

**SYMBOLISM:** The use of symbols to express ideas, especially using concrete symbols to express abstract concepts. E.g. “*Verily, He is the Tree of Life . . .*”

**IDIOM:** A form of expression peculiar to a particular language. A way of saying things that has developed in a language where the meaning cannot be deduced from analysing the separate words of the saying. E.g. “*I bear witness, O my God . . .*”

**FIGURE OF SPEECH:** a form of rhetorical expression which gives variety or force to what is being said, especially hyperbole (exaggeration) or metaphor. E.g. “*My back is bowed by the burden of my sins . . .*”

**COLLOQUIALISM:** Words belonging to ordinary or familiar conversation; not formal or literary. E.g. “*I’m letting everyone know, right now, that I’m completely powerless and You’re really mighty.*”

### **Examples of Metaphors:**

“I have wakened in Thy *shelter* . . .”

**Literal:** a shelter is a structure to protect one from the weather, etc.

**Metaphorical:** protection and care.

“The Universal *House* of Justice”

**Literal:** a house or building in which people live.

**Metaphorical:** a legislative or deliberative assembly.

## Translating metaphors into African languages:

### 1. Metaphors that translate with no problems:

E.g. “brighten our eyes”, “enkindle our hearts”, “immerse him in the ocean of Thy grace”. Metaphors such as these will probably be readily understood in most African languages without any need for change. In Setswana, even the more unusual metaphor “gird up the loins” is perfectly understandable when translated literally.

### 2. Metaphors which are unusual, but which are understandable:

The use of novel metaphors and expressions in Bahá'í texts will help to enrich the whole language. It is a matter of taste and feeling for the language in deciding whether a literally translated metaphor is acceptable or not, but such terms will become familiar with usage. English Bahá'í texts contain many examples of expressions which were unfamiliar to us before we became Bahá'ís: “deepening”, “fireside”, “manifestation”, “Self-Subsisting”.

### **3. Metaphors which would be ugly or amusing in translation:**

A beautiful metaphor in one language might be funny or ugly in another. For instance, English speakers would no doubt be greatly bemused if they knew that the Setswana translation of: “. . . the prince of all goodly deeds” actually back-translates as: “the great calf of all goodly deeds”—an apt and beautiful metaphor in Setswana. The metaphors might be very different, but their meanings are the same. Similarly, we might say “the foot of the hill” in English, but this would sound very funny if translated literally into an African language.

If an English metaphor becomes ugly or amusing when translated, then it needs to be replaced with an African metaphor of similar meaning, or else paraphrased in some way.

### **4. Metaphors which would be meaningless in translation:**

A simple example would be “Day-Spring”, a poetic way of saying dawn. Previously this was mistakenly translated into Setswana as “Day-Fountain”—which is meaningless. An equivalent poetic expression in Setswana would be “the dawn of the horns of the cattle” (i.e. just when it is light enough to make out the horns of the cattle in the kraal) which would sound pretty peculiar in English.

#### ***Example of paraphrasing a metaphor:***

*TEXT:* “a tower of strength to the fugitive” (*there are no towers in Setswana culture!*)

*SETSWANA:* “a true and trusty friend to the fugitive”

## THE EXAMPLE OF SHOGHI EFFENDI

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Studying the way in which Shoghi Effendi translated the Writings into English provides many insights for the Bahá'í translator—as long as we remember that we are not working under the same infallible guidance as was the Guardian! The Guardian himself revised his published translation of The Hidden Words several times, which should make us feel humble about our own efforts to translate the Word of God.

Generally, as long as a passage can be faithfully rendered from the English, the translator should not deviate from a straight-forward translation. However, this is seldom the case and the translator is faced with many problems such as a passage that is correct when compared word-for-word with the original, but which sounds convoluted, confusing or ugly. Similarly, there will be words and phrases in the English that seem to have no direct equivalent in the African language used for the translation. In such cases, careful consideration of the methods used by the Guardian in his translations can be of assistance:

- ▶ In the Arabic, the last part of the first Hidden Word has four adjectives and promises a kingdom that is: “*eternal, permanent, eternal, ancient*” (dá’iman báqíyan azalan qadíman). Shoghi Effendi first rendered this as: “*a sovereignty, heavenly, ancient, imperishable and everlasting*”, which (a) changes the order of the words; (b) combines the two synonymous Arabic words meaning ‘*eternal*’ and (c) adds the word ‘*heavenly*’ to bring out the spiritual nature of the ‘*sovereignty*’ implied in the Arabic. When the Guardian revised his translation of The Hidden Words, he decided ‘*heavenly*’ was unnecessary and omitted it; in doing so he also added to the euphony of the English as each word in the phrase now shares a sound with a word following it: “*a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.*”
- ▶ In a similar vein to the preceding example, the second sentence of the Short Obligatory Prayer which says “. . . to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth.” has an additional phrase in Arabic “*wa da’fí wa iqtidárika*” (to my weakness and Thy power). Presumably Shoghi Effendi felt that this third phrase was already covered by “. . . to my powerlessness and to Thy might”.
- ▶ Hidden Word no. 21 from the Arabic says: “*Upon the tree of effulgent glory I have **hung** for thee the choicest fruits. . . .*” In fact, the Arabic text literally says “*ordained for thee*” but Shoghi Effendi chose the word ‘*hung*’ to complete the metaphor of the fruits on the tree.
- ▶ Shoghi Effendi did not always translate an Arabic or Persian word the same way. It depended upon the context in which the word was used. This applied even to words with very specific meanings such as ‘*dove*’ or ‘*nightingale*’. The word ‘*varqá*’ means ‘*dove*’. Sometimes Shoghi Effendi translated it as ‘*dove*’, but sometimes he translated it as ‘*nightingale*’. In the last verse of the Kitáb-i-Íqán, ‘*varqa*’ is translated as ‘*Mystic Bird*’.
- ▶ The word ‘*Bahá*’ in Arabic primarily means ‘*beauty*’, but also ‘*splendour*’, ‘*effulgence*’, ‘*glory*’. There is no one English word that can encompass all these meanings. When the word ‘*Bahá*’ is associated with the name of ‘*Bahá’u’lláh*’, Shoghi Effendi chooses ‘*Glory*’ as the most appropriate meaning. But when he translated the names of the Bahá’í months, he chose ‘*Splendour*’ as the best translation for the month named ‘*Bahá*’.

## The Example of Shoghi Effendi - page 2

- ▶ The word '*Qayyum*' has been used both in the Qur'án and in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh as one of the attributes of God and, in such a context, Shoghi Effendi in his translations has rendered the word '*Qayyum*' as '*Self-subsisting*', '*Self-existent*' and '*the All-compelling*'. [quoted from a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice, 15 September 1983]
- ▶ In The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf (p. 4 of the English text) Bahá'u'lláh repeats the phrase "O Lord, my Lord!" nineteen times— which would sound rather unusual in English. Shoghi Effendi translates this passage thus: "O Lord, my Lord! and again, O Lord, my Lord! and yet again O Lord, my Lord!"
- ▶ In the Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 196, Shoghi Effendi simplifies some Súfí terminology that would have no meaning for a western reader. The Guardian's translation reads: "*Gazing with the eye of God, he will perceive within every atom a door that leadeth him to **the stations of absolute certitude.***" In the original Persian text there are actually three stations of certitude mentioned according to a formula that would be familiar to readers from an Islamic background: visual certainty, real certainty and true certainty (*'aynu'l-yaqín*, *aqqu'l-yaqín* and *núru'l-yaqín*). Shoghi Effendi contracts all three terms into the phrase "*stations of absolute certitude*". Again in the Kitáb-i-Íqán (p. 127) the verse translated as "*Twelve hundred and eighty years have passed since the dawn of the Muhammadan Dispensation, . . .*" is a simplification of the Arabic which says "*One thousand two hundred and seventy-eight years . . .*"—an exactness which would spoil the poetry of the English. This strategy of simplification can be useful when translating letters of the House of Justice or Shoghi Effendi that mention technical terms which assume a high degree of education or knowledge of English not possessed by those for whom the translation is intended. Such terms should be simplified or paraphrased in the translation.
- ▶ Rodwell's translation of the Qur'án was used by Shoghi Effendi as the basis for his own translations of passages from the Qur'án in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. However, in one instance he not only departed significantly from Rodwell's translation, but from all the existing English translations done by other distinguished scholars of Arabic. All these scholars agree that Qur'án verse 55:5 should be translated something like this: "*The Sun and the Moon each have their times (or run their courses according to a certain rule).*" Shoghi Effendi translated the same verse thus: "*Verily, the sun and the moon are both condemned to the torment of infernal fire.*" This should convince us as to the reason why we should translate the Writings from the Guardian's English and not directly from the Persian or Arabic!

## SOME EXAMPLES FROM SETSWANA TRANSLATIONS

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The following examples are illustrations of techniques that have been used for one specific language: Setswana. Even though there is a similarity amongst all Bantu languages—which stretch from Uganda to South Africa—the problems encountered in the texts below are specific to Setswana and may or may not occur in other African languages. However, the strategies used to overcome the problems may be of assistance to translators working in any language.

### 1

*TEXT:* “Be fair to yourselves and to others . . .”

*PROBLEM:* There is no word in Setswana to translate the concept of “being fair”.

*SOLUTION:* The opposite of “being fair” does exist in Setswana, so make the Setswana translation a ‘double negative’ which says: “Do not cheat yourselves, and do not cheat others . . .”

### 2

*TEXT:* “Thou hast created all humanity from the same stock”

*PROBLEM:* The word “stock” has no Setswana equivalent.

*SOLUTION:* “Thou hast created (moulded) all humanity from the same (potter’s) clay.” One of the words in Setswana for ‘create’ also means ‘to mould - as a potter’, so this gave the idea of using the word for ‘clay’ (of the type used by potters) to translate the word ‘stock’. Not only does this produce a beautiful metaphor in Setswana, but there it also creates an assonance as the words for ‘create’ and ‘clay’ come from the same root and so are linked in sound as well as in meaning.

### 3

*TEXT:* “the Pen of Revelation”, etc.

*PROBLEM:* There is no adequate Setswana word for “pen” other than one derived from the English: “*pene*”. This just doesn’t sound reverent when applied to “the Pen of Revelation”—it sounds very colloquial.

*SOLUTION:* Bahá’u’lláh wrote with a reed-pen and there is a word for a reed in Setswana. The Setswana translation for “pen” in the Bahá’í Writings is thus: “the reed which writes”. It sounds unusual at first, although not ugly, and quickly becomes familiar to readers of the Bahá’í Writings when it is explained to them.

### 4

*TEXT:* “they that earn their livelihood”

*PROBLEM:* There is no word for “livelihood” in Setswana.

*SOLUTION:* “they that live by the sweat of their brows”

### 5

*TEXT:* “O immortal phoenix!”

*PROBLEM:* There is no bird equivalent to a nightingale in Setswana, but we can still say “bird of the beautiful melody”. But with a phoenix there is no cultural equivalent at all.

*SOLUTION:* The word “phoenix” is not translated, other than being written as “*finikisi*” according to the rules of Setswana pronunciation. The word is then explained in a glossary. A similar strategy is used for words such as “Lote tree”.

### 6

*TEXT:* “even as the cup-bearer, who proffereth not his cup till he findeth a seeker”

*PROBLEM:* “Cup-bearer” can be translated accurately, but it is a meaningless concept in Setswana.

*SOLUTION:* To give meaning to the otherwise meaningless “cup-bearer”, the word “seeker” was changed in the Setswana to “one who is thirsty”, i.e.: “even as the cup-bearer who does not take out his cup until he finds one who is thirsty”. This completes the extended metaphor without changing the underlying meaning of the text.



7

*TEXT:* “from the nightingale of affection and desire loosen not thy hold”

*PROBLEM:* A literal translation in Setswana reads: “do not slacken your holding on to the sweet-singing bird of affection and desire”. Although this sounds correct, in this context it sounds more like a literal grabbing of an ordinary bird as the word “bird” in Setswana, even a sweet-singing one, does not convey the same poetic and symbolic connotations as does “nightingale” in the English.

*SOLUTION:* Make the bird a “*heavenly* sweet-singing bird” in the Setswana. The extra word “heavenly” is not in the original text, but its addition now conveys more faithfully the symbolic intent of the English.

8

*TEXT:* “Thou art He before the revelations of Whose omnipotence the quintessence of power hath trembled.”

*PROBLEM:* The Setswana translation is word-for-word correct, but it is ‘weak’; it does not match the grandeur and the eloquence of the original. Firstly, the English implies that the “revelations” are dynamic and have a mighty force behind them, whereas the Setswana “revelations” are more like static “uncoverings”. Secondly, the translation of “quintessence” is good, but it is the same word normally used for essence—not a stronger word.

*SOLUTION:* “It is Thou Whom the *outpourings* of the revelations of Thine omnipotence have made to tremble the *very marrow* of power itself.” The addition of the word “outpourings” – which is not in the English – changes the “revelations” from being static to being dynamic. The use of a Setswana idiom for “quintessence”, plus extending the syntax to make the idiom more expressive, creates a meaning much closer to that of the original text.

9

*TEXT:* “I have breathed within thee a breath of My own Spirit . . .”

*PROBLEM:* The text does not say: “a breath of My Spirit”. If the word “own” is not encompassed then the translation is ‘weak’. An added problem in Setswana is that the words for “breath” and “spirit” are the same.

*SOLUTION:* “I have breathed within thee a part of that Spirit which is of Me.”

10

*TEXT:* “Thy remembrance” or “remembrance of Thee”

*PROBLEM:* The Setswana used to be “Your remembering” which was ambiguous: is God remembering us or are we remembering God? This was improved to “to remember You” which is unambiguous, but is ‘remembrance’ really the same as ‘remembering’? From the original Arabic, remembrance of God is closer to ‘mentioning’ God. For instance, repeating “Alláh-u-Abhá” 95 times would be “remembrance of God”.

*SOLUTION:* The Setswana now reads “to mention You”, which is not only a better translation but now the Setswana makes much better sense.

**Assorted mistranslations and problems:**

- ▶ “the mount of faithfulness” used to be translated as “small mountain of faithfulness” due to a misunderstanding of the word “mount”. It is now translated as “mountain”.
- ▶ “breeze” used to be translated as “small-wind” until someone pointed out that the use of the diminutive in Setswana (i.e. the word “wind” with a diminutive suffix) is often pejorative, i.e. the word “small-wind” actually conveyed the sense of “a small, miserable, annoying wind, hot and drafty”. The translation for “breeze” now reads “a cool/refreshing wind”. Think carefully of the shades of meaning a word might carry.

## STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING TRANSLATIONS

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1. *Inspiration!* Prayer and deep-thought can bring up surprisingly apt solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Always pray for guidance before you start work on a translation.
2. Refer to other passages in the Writings that might illuminate the meaning of the passage being translated.
3. Paraphrasing English expressions into understandable equivalents. E.g. “pavilion” might become “the royal shelter”; “fleeting shadow” might be “shadow that passes like the blink of an eye”.
4. Using several words to translate one English word (as above).
5. Using only one word to translate several English words. For instance, in Setswana the phrase “close thine eyes to” is translated correctly by only one word.
6. If necessary, using an idiom in the African language that corresponds in *meaning* to the English idiom, even if the words might be different.
7. Adding words to the translation which are not in the original text, but which are necessary to bring out the *meaning* of the original.
8. Replacing a pronoun (he, it, they) by the noun it refers to if that will add clarity.
9. Referring to the original Persian or Arabic text. This has to be done with great care and should only be attempted by someone recognized for the depth of their knowledge in these languages.
10. Change the word order in a sentence if it is necessary to avoid an awkward grammatical problem, as long as it makes no difference to the meaning. Examples:  
*TEXT*: “Myriads of mystic tongues find utterance in one speech”  
*SETSWANA*: “In one speech there are myriads of mystic tongues speaking.”  
Tablet of Ahmad:  
*TEXT*: “Whosoever desireth, let him turn aside from this counsel and whosoever desireth let him choose the path to his Lord.”  
*SETSWANA*: “He who desireth, let him choose the path to his Lord, and he who does not desire, let him turn aside from this counsel.”
11. If the meaning of a long sentence gets lost in translation, divide it into shorter sentences. The order of the shorter sentences need not be the same as in the original.
12. Avoid literal translations that would make no sense. E.g. don’t try and translate literally such phrases as: “none but the smallest *handful*”, “*wind-flowers*”, “*living waters*”, “*day-star*”, etc.
13. **Card-index or notebook of Bahá’í vocabulary**: Build-up a card-index or alphabetical notebook of translated terms so that you can refer to how you have translated a word previously. This can be very helpful but beware of using your vocabulary list as a list of rules. Remember that Shoghi Effendi often translated the same Arabic or Persian word in several different ways, depending upon the context.

Here is a cautionary tale concerning the Persian Hidden Word which says: “A myriad lives he would *forsake* to hasten to the abode of his beloved.” The Setswana word generally used to translate ‘forsake’, as recorded in the Setswana Bahá’í Vocabulary index, literally means “to throw away”. In the context of this Hidden Word, however, this translation could convey a very unfortunate impression! When the mistake was realised, the translation was changed to: “He would sacrifice his life many times . . . .”

# TESTING A TRANSLATION

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**1. Circulate Draft Translations:** ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice have all told us that the ideal is to have translations done by an expert committee. Although a formal committee is not generally feasible at this stage of the Faith in Africa, there are ways in which Bahá’í translators can be true to the spirit of this guidance. One way is to involve the whole community in testing draft translations.

- (a) Circulate passages of what you have translated so far so that you can get feed-back from other believers. Don’t wait until you have translated the whole text, send out excerpts. This is especially easy if you can put your translations onto a computer. Make 10 or 20 copies and circulate them amongst friends who speak the language well. Ask for their comments about the clarity and style of the translation.

Remember, however, that these friends may not be familiar with the goals and techniques of Bahá’í translation so, whilst their comments can be very useful, sometimes you must resist changing the style of the translation if these comments contradict your translation objectives. For example, reviewers might complain that the language of the translation is ‘too literary or old-fashioned’ and that the vocabulary used is ‘too complicated’; similar objections have been made about English translations of the Writings.

- (b) Publish extracts from your draft translation in the Newsletter.

**2. USE your translations:** Take your translations for a ‘test drive’. Use draft copies of a translation of the Holy Writings in real situations: at Feasts and gatherings; for your personal devotions. A translation takes on a different meaning when it is used in a devotional setting.

The goal of the Bahá’í translator when translating the Holy Writings is to make the listener or reader feel that they are hearing the words of Bahá’u’lláh, and not the work of a translator. Perfection in translation is approached when the personality of the translators is no longer apparent in the text, leaving only the pure Word of God exposed to the reader. A participant at a translation workshop in Ethiopia gave this analogy: When you are driving along a smooth, newly-made tar road you are enjoying the journey and not giving a thought as to who made the road. However, if the new road is full of bumps and pot-holes you will certainly be having some thoughts about the road-maker! The aim of Bahá’í translation, then, is to try and remove our ‘bumps’ and ‘pot-holes’ from the finished product.

When draft translations are used for devotional purposes, phrases and passages that reflect more the efforts of the translators rather than the pure Word of God tend to become much more apparent, so, if something about the translation ‘feels’ wrong, or doesn’t sound like something we would expect to hear in the Writings, have a second look at the translation of that passage.

Using your draft translations is another way to pick up typing, spelling and other small errors that might get overlooked during proof-reading.

**3. Proof-Reading:** Proof-read translations carefully, and more than once. This is a very tedious job, but a very necessary one. All the hard work put into translating a text can be spoilt through poor proof-reading. Some of the mistakes to look out for:

1. Typos: simple typing errors.
2. Misspellings (by you!).
3. Editing changes not incorporated.
4. Missing sentences or phrases: easy to overlook during proof-reading as the passage may make sense without them.

No matter how careful you are, a large publication will almost inevitably contain small mistakes—it happens even to the most professional publishers. It is said that Arab carpet-weavers always weave one deliberate error into their intricate designs to show that ‘only Alláh is perfect’.

During the printing stage, check the printers proofs carefully to ensure no pages are missing, that passages are not cut-off at the bottom of a page and that the text flows correctly from one page to the next.

## BACK-TRANSLATION

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‘Back-translation’ is a simple method of ensuring that translations are of a reasonable quality and accuracy. Three people are needed for this procedure:

- ▶ *PERSONS A & B*: Native-speakers of the African language into which the translation is being made. Preferably, but not necessarily, they should be Bahá’ís.
- ▶ *PERSON C*: A native speaker of English who must be a Bahá’í and who must have a deeper knowledge of English beyond just speaking it as their mother-tongue. *PERSON C* is not necessarily a pioneer as there are Africans who are bilingual with both English and an African language as their mother tongues.

*PERSON A* does the initial translation of the English text into his or her language, using all available resources.

*PERSONS B* reads the translated text and translates it aloud back into English (i.e. he ‘back-translates’ it) to *PERSON C*.

*PERSON C* compares the back-translation against the original English text and raises any queries or objections along the way. The main responsibility of *PERSON C* is to ensure that the translation does not say the wrong thing or give a misleading impression about the Faith. He is not concerned with grammar or word order. His main concern is that the translation does not make any theological or historical errors and that it conveys the overall sense of the English. If there is time for a thorough translation, he should also comment on facts and concepts that have been simplified or omitted. Any problems in the translation should be noted.

*PERSON B* should not look at the English whilst back-translating. He should back-translate exactly what is on the page and not try and imagine what the English might have said. If he cannot make sense of a particular passage because the grammatical structure is unclear, then this should be noted.

Finally, the annotated translation is brought back to the original translator, *PERSON A*, for comment, consultation and amendments. The final version should be agreeable to all three people involved.

BACK-TRANSLATION is an excellent method for checking translations when speed is important or where highly-skilled translators are not available or where the work of non-Bahá’í translators has to be checked. The process of back-translation is explained in more detail in the attached letter written by Dr Jeff Gruber.

It should be noted that back-translation is not a prescribed method that all Bahá’í translators must use. The actual process used will depend upon many factors, including the personnel available, their level of skill, where they live, the time they can spare, etc. One of the values of this process, however, is that it helps fulfil the wishes of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice that translations should preferably be done by a committee made up individuals with different skills, rather than by an individual. This still applies even if the members of this ‘committee’ seldom meet and conduct most of their work through the post.

Even a skilled and experienced translator who prefers to work on their own should appreciate and realise the necessity for input from other minds. Shoghi Effendi, the world’s greatest translator, sent most of his work to George Townshend for him to give his opinions and comments.

The concept of back-translation can also be valuable for someone translating on their own. Read back what you have written and say to yourself: “Now, what would a native speaker of this language, who had never seen the original English, think this means if he read it for the first time.”

## THINK DIFFERENTLY WHEN IT IS *NOT* THE WRITINGS!

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A Bahá'í translator gets into the habit of carefully considering the meaning of each word:

- this is good practice when translating the Holy Writings;
- this can be very unhelpful when translating texts written by Bahá'í authors!

It is necessary to think differently when translating texts that are not from the Writings. The golden rule is this:

**Say it like a Motswana would say it.** (or a Zulu, a Xhosa, a Pedi, . . .)

Try to imagine that the author is speaking to an audience and you are doing an oral translation for them. You are concentrating on the message, not the words of the speaker. As you are a good oral translator you will express the speaker's message using the idioms and patterns of your own language. Sometimes when the speaker says things that you know the audience might not understand or be familiar with, as you translate you add your own explanations to make the message clear. Sometimes, if the speaker is unfamiliar with your culture and uses an example that is not culturally relevant, you will use your own example that is meaningful to the audience and which conveys the same message.

In the written text the author is using idiomatic English to convey thoughts and concepts that are familiar to English-speakers. For the translation to sound idiomatic to an African, it shouldn't follow the pattern of the English. Also, some of the thoughts and concepts used by the author may not be applicable in an African context. When you are not translating the works of the Central Figures of the Faith or of the House of Justice, there is no sin in changing the way the author wrote it, or even changing the content here and there, if it is going to make the translation more understandable and relevant to the reader.

### **Strategy:**

1. Ask yourself: What is the author saying in this sentence or paragraph?
2. Ask yourself: How would I express the same message in my own language if I was talking to a group of people?
3. Write the sentence or paragraph in your own words.
4. Compare it with the original. Check that your version includes all the points and concepts that the author wanted to convey – but not necessarily in the same order or using the same words.

**Examples:**

1. A simple example: In order to illustrate a point, the text has a fictitious story about a particular person or people, all with non-African names. To make the story meaningful to an African audience, change all the names to African names.

2. **Problem:** A paragraph in some institute material contains concepts that are foreign to African thought such as: “*Feeling good about oneself*”; “*What I like best about myself*”; “*Getting in touch with your feelings*”; “*I am special because I am me*”. Even if these phrases could be translated, what would they mean to an African?

**Solution:** Examine the phrase in the context of the whole paragraph and then explain the paragraph in your own words.

3. A book for children contains a simple quotation from the Writings about honesty.

**Problem:** In translation the quotation is rather complicated for children.

**Strategy:** What is the point of the quotation? It was to illustrate the importance of honesty.

**Solution:** Choose a different quotation that in your language would be readily understood by children.

4. Some institute material contains questions about a passage from the Writings. One question asks what the word ‘*effulgence*’ means.

**Problem:** In English the word ‘*effulgence*’ is unusual but the translation of the word into your language would be understood by everyone. In the translation, therefore, the question does not challenge anyone.

**Strategy:** What was the point of this question? It was to make the reader think about the meaning of the words in the Holy Writings.

**Solution:** In the translation choose a different word, or even a phrase, from the passage that would be more difficult to understand in your language.

5. You are asked to translate a message to the community from an Assembly Secretary who writes English with a Persian accent. Here is an extract from her letter: “*We wish, with rejoicing spirit, to extend to you our warmest and deepest congratulations. As you celebrate this momentous and remarkable era of our beloved Faith, we join you in prayers that the Omnipotent Lord may ever strengthen your resolve and determination as you continue to magnify His name, glorify His Cause and spread His lofty and healing message among those who thirst for the water of life.*” If this message were translated literally, how meaningful do you think it would be to the African friends? What thoughts and concepts is the secretary trying to convey in this message? How would you convey these same thoughts and concepts in your own language and still convey the depth of feeling in this message?

## **'MINORITY' LANGUAGES & SIMPLIFIED WRITINGS**

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By 'minority' languages is meant those languages which only have a small number of speakers, or which are only spoken in remote, usually rural, areas.

Whereas there are educated indigenous Bahá'ís who speak good English and who can tackle translations into 'major' languages of the country, it is unlikely that there are such Bahá'ís amongst speakers of these 'minority' languages. This presents a problem for translating into these languages.

One solution to this problem is to prepare simplified English versions of the Writings for these translators to work from. The original Six-Year Plan said that simplified versions of the Writings (i.e. in English) could be prepared for the purposes of translation (i.e. for translators to work with when they are translating from the English). These simplified English versions are for the use of the translator only and should not be published.

At the request of the World Centre, excellent simplified versions of important passages from the Writings have been prepared by Dr Jeffrey Gruber.

*Footnote:* Paraphrased versions of messages from the House of Justice are another matter altogether. The House of Justice has said that it is quite permissible to produce such 'simplified' versions, but that they must be labelled as such and not be signed 'The Universal House of Justice'.

## PRINTING

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After all the work that has gone into translating a book, it would be a pity if the final printed publication was so badly formatted as to be illegible or ugly.

- ▶ Bahá'í publications should be clear and legible.
- ▶ Bahá'í publications should be pleasing to the eye.
- ▶ Bahá'í publications should reflect the reverence due to the Faith.

### Common Layout & Formatting Problems:

As many communities today use a computer to do their own typesetting, here is a list of common formatting & layout errors to avoid:

- ▶ Too many words to a line of text: a line of text that is too long is difficult to read.
- ▶ Too many lines of text on a page: leave a decent margin at top and bottom..
- ▶ Not enough 'white space' on a page: too much text crammed together is not easy on the eye.
- ▶ Too much white space on a page: that makes the page look 'holey' rather than 'holy'.
- ▶ Large blocks of text all in italics: use of too much italics significantly decreases legibility.
- ▶ A serif font (e.g. Times) for the body of the text is easier to read than a sans-serif font (e.g. Arial).
- ▶ Font size is too small: rural Africans are going to struggle just with the process of reading the text; don't make it even more difficult for them by using tiny typefaces. Font sizes for the body of the text should generally be either 11 point or 12 point.
- ▶ No variation in typeface: it looks nicer if headings are in a different font.
- ▶ Too much variation in typefaces: looks gaudy and confusing.
- ▶ Words are underlined: underlining significantly decreases legibility—never use it. Underlining is a hangover from typewriter days when there was no other way to emphasise text. Use bold or italics to draw attention to selected headings, phrases or words.

- ▶ Headings all in decorative capitals **LIKE THIS** or

**LIKE THIS**: decorative capitals are only meant to be used for the initial letter; used for the whole word renders the word illegible.

- ▶ Avoid hyphenating words whenever possible: inexperienced readers find hyphenation difficult to deal with.
- ▶ Consider using left-hand justification rather than full justification: although it might not look quite so pretty, the 'ragged' right-hand margin makes it easier for the reader to keep his place in the text.
- ▶ With prayers and compilations, try to avoid a paragraph ending at the bottom of the page: there is a tendency for inexperienced readers to end the prayer at the bottom of the page without turning over.