

Towards a Common Aim and Framework for Tools and Research in Support of Bible Translation and Biblical Language Online Learning

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Abstract: The broader biblical studies and scholarly community has had a burgeoning interest in developing tools and resources that are useful not only for itself, but also in support of related ministry related activities, such as Bible translation and the teaching and equipping of pastors in the Majority world context. This has led to the formation of groups such as the Global Education and Research Technologies (GERT) section of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), as well as activities and projects on such sites as <http://biblicalhumanities.org> and <https://github.com/biblicalhumanities>.

While these groups have been valuable for productive interaction, they have not had very clear overarching objectives. Participants offer valuable contributions, but much of the work tends to go on in isolation following the inspiration and motivation of the individuals rather than of the group.

This paper identifies this problem, some potential aims, and Bible translation resources from SIL as a sort of case study where tools and directed work from the broader community could benefit both the biblical studies/scholarly community and the Bible translation community at the same time. It also identifies the necessary work of synthesizing the specialized research and data of the scholarly community as part of the overall broader needs of the Bible translation movement. This **synthesizing work** is a critical notion towards conceiving a framework that would address a suggested aim for our joint communities.

Keywords: bible translation tools, bible translation tools framework, bible translation resources

Problem statement

To a certain extent we have an abundance of tools, methodologies, datasets, aims, organizations and resources. We currently lack a clearly defined common aim. With a clearly defined common aim, we can identify gaps in what is needed to achieve that aim and we can envision a framework to support that aim.

Potential aims

- Generalized tools to support shareable, interrelated scholarly research; development of datasets
- Generalized tools to support development of translation guidance
- Generalized tools to support the analysis of biblical languages
- Generalized tools to support the development of data to support biblical language learning
- Generalized tools to support biblical language learning

"Generalized" is a common theme here - the idea being that we wish to foster collaboration.

- If one aim is identified the tools may be specific to that aim, but generic enough to support facets of that work. A database with a schema is specific and yet there may be a generalized query language to accomplish a variety of tasks.
- If multiple aims are identified, then the tools and standards defined need to support the common thread among all of those aims; e.g. perhaps standardized formats for biblical data; standardized APIs for interchange of data

The needs of Bible translation (An SIL point of view)

Across the overall context of Bible translation there are several continua that while not dealing with identical ideas provoke some general observations. The following tables are some observations that are not based on empirical data, but I believe would be substantiated by most involved in the Bible translation movement.

Table 1. The “Ideal” vs. “Reality”

“Ideal” All translators would be:	“Reality” Translation teams are:
functional in original languages (Greek/Hebrew)	lucky to have one member of the team functional in original languages
able to think abstractly, critically, analytically	generally, more concrete, sequential thinkers
using the original language source texts	using trade language or language of wider communication versions as source texts

There are probably some differences of opinion about the value of working directly from the original biblical language texts. Most of those concerns in either direction tend to be based on whether the translator has adequate command over the original languages, and how ‘adequate’ is defined. In many cases, it is deemed ‘adequate’ to translate from a trade language or language of wider communication Bible version with the assumption that significant attention to exegetical questions and translation challenges were dealt with in that particular translation. This runs the danger of the ‘telephone’ game where the message gets more and more distorted with each successive translation unless appropriate attention is paid to the original language sources. Nevertheless, this is an accurate representation of our current ‘reality’ and is one example of a continuum that has several analogs to follow:

Table 2. Translator Education Levels

Oral Bible Translation contexts	SIL “traditional”	UBS “traditional”
Bilingual, but generally less formally educated	Junior High - High School	College; Grad School

There is a lot of momentum around oral Bible translation (OBT) these days. In general, in those contexts there is still need for someone on the team to be literate and able to interact with exegetical resource materials. The challenge there is even more critical to address in that there are effectively no ‘oral’ exegetical resources available for oral Bible translation contexts.

Table 3. Types of resource needs and interests

	Translator	Consultant
Complexity	Simple/direct	Deep/abstract
Information preferences	Synthesized	Variety
Conclusions/presentation	Clear recommendations	Debate

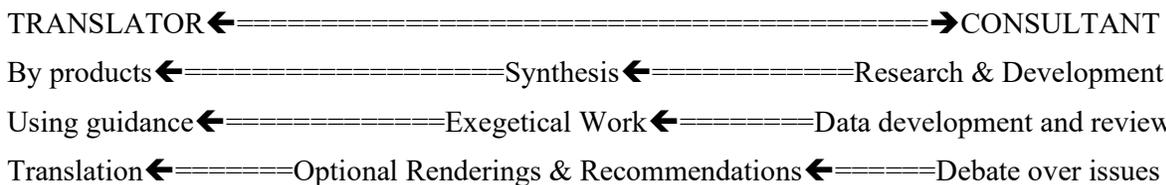
In general, the translator is the ‘workman’ and the consultant is the ‘tradesman/journeyman.’ This corresponds again with the general complex vs. simplified continuum.

Table 4. Resource and tool needs by translation context/goal

New Translation	Revision
Editing/drafting	Key Terms checks
Source texts	Parallel text comparisons
Basic guidance (Translator’s Notes/Translator’s Handbooks)	Discourse considerations
	Higher level of consistency across translation

Depending on the stage or current aim of the translation project, the complexity of the tools and the attention to subtlety, nuance and perhaps higher grade of quality and consistency in translation may vary. In first time/new translation projects, it is a growing process and more attention is given to just getting things drafted. In revisions and second translations, attention shifts to more subtle concerns.

Over all of these continua we begin to see trends between Translator and Consultant/Scholar and between simplicity and complexity:



In a hyperbolic way, we may say that translators are generally more interested in getting the job done, having clear guidance, and not particularly interested in the subtleties, nuances and deeper questions. Also, in a hyperbolic way, we may say that consultants, while very interested in translators getting the job done, are interested in the **job being done “right”**, that all the subtleties and nuances are accounted for, and are also interested in deeper questions and current scholarly debates.

SIL's approaches to translation resources

I oversee the development of a variety of translation reference series:

- **Translator's Notes** - a synthesis and distillation of recommendations based on the exegetical and translation specific concerns for each book of the Bible
- **Exegetical Summaries** - a summarization of exegetical questions/issues that are raised verse by verse for each book of the Bible as represented by leading scholars and commentaries
- **Semantic and Structure Analyses** - an analysis of the topics, themes, and discourse devices used for a book of the Bible; attention given to discourse segmentation on the basis of linguistic analysis of the original language texts.

These three series in many ways capture a continuum between the Translator and the Consultant/Scholar.

Table 5. SIL Translation Resource Use Continuum

Translator	Translator and Consultant	Consultant/Scholar
synthesized	summarized	specialized
Translator's Notes	Exegetical Summaries	Semantic and Structure Analyses

We see our highest demand to be Translator's Notes (TNs)

On the whole the ratio of Translators to Consultants is probably around 10:1. TNs are specifically targeted to use language that is (in general) accessible to a high school level of English proficiency. The presentation is on the whole geared to more concrete sequential thinkers. They focus on providing clear and specific recommendations for translating a given verse. They provide options for rendering a verse based on specific linguistic and cultural contexts and constraints that we have encountered around the world.

We see moderate demand for Exegetical Summaries.

Some of our translators have a higher capacity for their professional development and become more interested and capable of engaging with deeper exegetical issues and discussions. They may spend more time with the Exegetical Summaries to understand for themselves how a given recommendation was arrived at for a Translator's Notes volume. Some of these go on to become consultants and scholars themselves and find Exegetical Summaries a useful tool for their tool belt. Some of these also become authors and editors of Translator's Notes volumes and find this summarization helpful in developing their own recommendations.

We see relatively small demand for Semantic and Structural Analyses.

In general, it has been translation consultants and biblical language scholars who have both done the work to develop this series and who probably are the most interested in their contributions. Good friend and Biblical Greek Discourse Grammar scholar, Steven Runge, wrote recently in the B-Greek forum:

“...what I am doing [in discourse studies] is not about arriving at a different reading than most, but about showing how I got there both for precision and to rule out potentially competing alternatives. I don't think the outcomes will be radically different than traditional approaches in most

cases, but how they were arrived at will be much more transparent and thus better able to address competing alternatives. If I am claiming a conclusion that no one else has ever claimed before, then I am probably wrong.”

The point being that research and development in semantics, structural analysis and discourse analysis will not necessarily result in radically new readings but is highly useful in providing more substantive rationale for defending exegetical conclusions by leveraging linguistic structures. Work at this level is helpful for providing additional confidence in choices made in the process of translation from biblical language source text to target language renderings.

A false dichotomy?

We might ask, if the highest need from the translation point of view is in the more general, synthesized tools like Translator's Notes - shouldn't we focus on efforts that provide for more of those? Wouldn't that be more bang for the buck? Bring More return on the investment, impact a higher number of people more directly and more concretely address the translation need? Why would we ever want to invest in more esoteric or specialized research projects or tools?

If you followed the discussion above, you would note that **synthesis** is a critical part of the process on the road toward producing resources like Translator's Notes. By definition, synthesis requires that you are **synthesizing** from a variety of separate, distinct elements. If all of the separate and distinct elements have already been completely identified and comprehensively defined and enumerated, then it is only the synthesizing work that needs to be done. However, even a cursory sampling of the types of translation issues and concerns will tell us pretty quickly that we don't have either a complete list of all issues to be addressed, but also that we have not comprehensively identified the instances of these issues across the corpus of the biblical text.

Katherine Barnwell in her well-respected volume, *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course for Mother-Tongue Translators*¹ (now undergoing revision) defines several features of language that generally do not simply transfer from language to language. Some examples:

- "Event Ideas" or verbal nouns
- "Of phrases: or genitive constructions
- Active and passive voice
- "Short cuts" or sentence fragments; implicit information
- Order of events
- Metaphors
- Similes
- Euphemisms
- Litotes
- Hyperboles
- Sarcasm and irony

¹ Barnwell, Katharine. *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course for Mother-Tongue Translators*. Dallas: SIL International, 1986.

- Metonymy and synecdoche
- Personification
- apostrophe
- Rhetorical questions
- Key biblical terms

Many other types of categories and lists could be conceived that represent both translation challenges as well as interesting research matter. From the above list, I am only aware of the **key biblical terms** having been identified as an issue that has had an exhaustive list of occurrences defined (for the New Testament only) and a tool in ParaText (the most widely-used Bible translation software) created to support reviewing the occurrences both in the source languages and the target translation to check for accuracy and consistency. In our Translator's Workplace² product, we have additionally a monograph on *Key Biblical Terms in the New Testament*³ which goes into more extensive discussion on each key term. We also have a monograph on *Rhetorical Questions in the New Testament*⁴, but do not yet have a tool in ParaText to facilitate checking them.

Analysis and **synthesis** of features like the ones listed above are typically what is needed to produce a volume of Translator's Notes. Without the more refined research to define, develop and flesh out the instances of features like the ones listed above, each author working on a volume of Translator's Notes needs to do all the work of identifying all of that for themselves before they are even able to begin synthesizing.

So - we need the work of the experts, the scholars, the consultants in order to facilitate the synthesizing work that is required to develop the tools that will benefit the most translation programs. We also need that work to be focused, exhaustive and expanded.

- Simple Lists of every occurrence of a given feature (e.g. verse numbers)
- Potentially definitions of subcategories of a given feature if appropriate
- Discussion of the feature in broad terms
- Discussion of the feature and how it is used for each verse

The very first bullet point above - a list of every occurrence of a given feature - would yield huge benefits:

- For the scholar, the lists can be used to compare and contrast instances and further refine their understanding of the feature in the source language.
- For the translator, the lists can be used to understand the feature and gain a more intuitive sense as to how it works in the source language, and to then compare how they are addressing that feature in their drafts in the same instances.
- For the consultant, the lists can be used as a checking mechanism to facilitate review of how the feature is being addressed and to help ensure consistency in the target translation.

² <https://www.sil.org/resources/publications/tw>

³ Barnwell, Katharine, Paul Dancy, and Anthony G. Pope. *Key Biblical Terms in the New Testament: An Aid for Bible Translators*. Dallas: SIL International, 2009.

⁴ SIL International. *Rhetorical Questions in the New Testament: A Checklist for Translators*. Dallas: SIL International, 1999.

- For the Translator's Notes author, the lists can be used to fill out the details needed for their exegetical analysis and synthesis work without having to do all the work themselves.

One of the challenges of producing Translator's Notes volumes is that it is almost harder than producing a single translation of a book of the Bible itself. Even a person writing a commentary would generally not need to cover as many issues as a TN author would normally attempt to address. It is in many ways a monumental undertaking. A significant way to minimize some of this hurdle would be if much of the exegetical and translation specific issues have already been identified in advance - for example, if these lists have all been defined, researched and made available in a well-defined format.

What's needed?

- We need a comprehensive list of language features and issues to be defined.
- We then need exhaustive lists of verse references for each of those features.
- Ultimately, it would finally be good to have content that discusses those features in general terms as well as content that addresses how each verse is using that feature in specific terms.
- Additionally, a tool that facilitates marking up biblical text with a user-defined taxonomy or terminology and can export the data into a well-defined format. Something like BART or ParaText with an XML export feature could work. The XML schema would need to be defined and ideally something readily importable back into BART and ParaText.
 - BART supports the markup facility and can easily be updated to support XML export.
 - ParaText already supports a wide-range of checking features; Key Terms checking is already an important, well-defined feature and could potentially be refactored for checking with these lists.

The advantages of taking this approach?

- Scholars are motivated by a clearly defined research problem.
- The scope of work for fleshing out any one of these lists is generally more readily achievable.
- The artifacts of the work are immediately useful at every step of the process.
 - A list of a feature even for a single book is a great start and useful set of data for a translator almost immediately.
 - A list of references even without comprehensive analysis is immediately useful for a consultant doing consistency checking for that particular feature.
- The broader discussion about a given feature is a great opportunity for an MA thesis or even PhD. dissertation and a valuable reference resource for translators and consultants once it is finished.

Possible disadvantages?

- *Do we have the scholars and exegetes needed to produce these sorts of tools/lists?*

This work is admittedly specialized. There is however a fairly large Bible translation community; many of which like to dig into a particular problem of interest to them and to report on it. Providing a clearly defined problem and need with an achievable outcome is likely to even generate interest in new scholarship.

- *How does breaking down translation processes and language features down into these lists square with Relevance theory or thinking about language being a much more complex interwoven combination of features and experience? Is this just fostering more atomization of approaches to translation rather than thinking more holistically?*

Breaking translation problems down into atomic lists is not necessarily mutually exclusive with understanding meaning as a complex interwoven network. Ideally the lists approach should confirm the interwoven network model, but as seen as exactly that - an interwoven network of features that influence and interact with one another; but those features still need to be identified.

- *Are there tools that could help with the synthesis work itself? Would we be better off supporting those?*

Both types of tools will ultimately be needed, but even a tool supporting synthesizing work will still need data to synthesize from, and it would be good for that data to be complete.

Conclusion

We are at a unique point in time with the right confluence of expertise, interests and funding to truly impact biblical scholarship, biblical language learning and Bible translation in dramatic ways. It is gratifying to be engaged in a discussion with this kind of scope and with the caliber of individuals, organizations and interests represented. It is my hope that this paper stimulates the thinking of my colleagues and that we all find ways to collaborate more effectively going forward. My suggestion is that we adopt the aim of:

- Generalized tools to support shareable, interrelated scholarly research; development of datasets

Ultimately, I believe these tools and datasets will contribute to the joint broader aim of Bible translation needs and biblical language online learning. Defining the specific gaps of both tools and research in this area will benefit all.

I look forward to seeing many of these gaps both in tools and in research beginning to be filled as a result of these discussions.

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