

INTERVIEW: EUGENE A. NIDA¹

Bible translation

1. Dr. Nida, in Bible translation what do you think of all inclusive language used in some recent translations of the Bible? Could you comment on all inclusive languages as a linguist and as a minister (or member of a religious group)?

John Robert Schmitz (Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP)

I am not acquainted with the phrase “all inclusive languages,” and so I am at a loss to know what you specifically refer to. But your question may relate to the fact that I have frequently mentioned that for major languages with a long history in Bible translating, it would probably be wise to consider three quite distinct types of translations. For example, older people who have grown up with a traditional translation may feel very uneasy with a translation in present-day language, because familiar expressions are treated so differently. But if the large secular majority of the population is to be reached with a meaningful message about God’s love, then certainly a translation into the

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Pesquisadores que enviaram perguntas ao Prof. Nida:

- Carlos Gohn (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – UFMG);
- Cristina Carneiro (Universidade Estadual Paulista – UNESP – São José do Rio Preto);
- Diva Cardoso de Camargo (Universidade Estadual Paulista – UNESP – São José do Rio Preto);
- Éda Heloisa Pilla (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul);
- Francis Aubert (Universidade de São Paulo – USP);
- João Azenha Junior (Universidade de São Paulo – USP);
- John Milton (Universidade de São Paulo – USP);
- John Robert Schmitz (Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP);
- Lucinéa Marcelino Villela (Fundação de Ensino Eurípides Soares da Rocha – Marília).

everyday language of daily conversation, television news, and popular books needs to be the basis of a Bible translation designed to reach the majority of people. But adolescents seem to never be content with the common language, and for them a translation into their distinctive form of language may have a special appeal.

2. How do you see the study of the *Bible* as Literature in American universities?

Diva Cardoso de Camargo (Universidade Estadual Paulista – UNESP – São José do Rio Preto)

There is an increasing number of courses in Bible literature offered in secular universities because the Bible contains some of the great literary masterpieces, for example, Deuteronomy 32.1-43, Isaiah 53, and Luke 15. Unfortunately some religious schools have overlooked the literary aspects of the Bible because they have concentrated so much on the theological content. Personally I welcome courses in the literature of the Bible because people need to have a better appreciation for the remarkable literary quality of so many of the biblical texts. Such a study will undoubtedly enrich people's understanding of and appreciation for the biblical texts. Where in world literature could one find a more meaningful literary complaint than in the third chapter of Job.

3. From time to time scientists, historians, anthropologists and even linguists make new discoveries about the authorship of some biblical books that conflict with the "official authors" established by Christian church. What is your point of view about it? How do you consider the issue of *Bible* authorship literally speaking?

Lucinéa Marcelino Villela (Fundação de Ensino Eurípides Soares da Rocha – Marília)

I see nothing disturbing in the new insights or theories about authorship of biblical books. For the most part all of these studies are genuine attempts to discover as much as possible about the origins and meanings of the texts. But some of the popular ideas of one generation will inevitably be altered in a following

generation, but these diversities of insight do not seriously distort the contents or relevance of the message.

4. Some years ago, a Scottish Publishing House, Canongate Books, released its first series of pocket biblical books, entitled *The Pocket Canons* (Series I). The goal of Canongate was releasing 12 biblical books (six from the Old Testament and six from the New Testament), with introductions elaborated by renowned personalities from different backgrounds and who initially had little religious connection with this task. Some of their foreword writers are: Bono Vox (vocalist of U2 band); Will Self (an English writer), Nick Cave (an Australian Rock musician and novelist), Doris Lessing and the Dalai Lama.

The edition reached a level of success that was unexpected even by the editors themselves and consequently Series II was released in 1999, including books like the Psalms, Jonah, Samuel, Romans and so on.

Due to its huge success Canongate had its idea purchased by 15 publishing houses from several countries around the world, including Europe, North America, Eastern countries such as Japan and Korea, and Brazil in South America.

According to the *Pocket Canons* editors this success is explained by the literary approach of both series and by the use of the Authorised King James Version of the *Bible*, described as a version which: "more than any other, and possibly more than any other work in history, has had an influence in shaping the language we speak and write today".

My question is:

How do you see the possibility of reading, translating and, of course, selling the *Bible* "only" as literature? Does it mean that the Bible, like any other text and book, can be interpreted according to the readers' intentions and context?

Lucinéa Marcelino Villela (Fundação de Ensino Eurípides Soares da Rocha – Marília)

The publication of biblical portions in the King James text by means of editions highlighting popular present-day persons is a great idea. So many people think that the antiquated language

of the King James Version makes the English text even closer to the original Greek and Hebrew texts. Such misconceptions do not worry me because it is ultimately the content that carries the impact.

5. Is it already possible to have an overview of positive results concerning translation studies of the *Bible* obtained by the newly created Eugene Nida Foundation?

Diva Cardoso de Camargo (Universidade Estadual Paulista - UNESP - São José do Rio Preto)

As yet the Nida Foundation has not been able to produce anything, but there will be a conference on translation at the University of Rome in the summer of 2003, and the papers represented by that consultation should be of interest. Benjamins will be producing two of my books, *Contexts in Translating* and *Enchanted by Language*, a story about some of my experiences working on so many projects during the last 50 years. An additional book by Philip Stine to be published by Jerome Press should also be coming out soon.

6. What can *Bible* translation scholars teach the rest of us who work in different aspects of translation studies?

John Milton (Universidade de São Paulo - USP)

Since Bible translation represents so many different kinds of languages and reflects so many different cultures, scholars should find considerable basic data to illustrate the close connections between language and culture. In fact, words only have meaning in terms of the culture of which the languages are an intimate part. Successes and failures in such enterprises constitute a rich resource of basic data about linguistic and cultural similarities and differences.

7. Does it worry you that there seems to be a considerable distance between *Bible* translation scholars and other scholars of translation studies? The New York conference last year was a

very rare opportunity for the two groups to meet and exchange ideas.

John Milton (Universidade de São Paulo – USP)

I have for years been deeply concerned about the differences in translation theory as reflected in the work of those concentrating on small tribal societies and those producing translations into major languages with centuries of use of biblical texts. Some translators working in small languages that have previously lacked Bible translations have tended to concentrate primarily on the linguistic aspects of their task and have accordingly neglected some of the important doctrinal implications of their work. But within the last few years such translators have realized the importance of greater depth of concern for the theological and anthropological implications of their work. The success of a number of exceptional scholarly translations into major languages is also helping to correct earlier neglect of theological insights.

8. You have mentioned on several occasions that future developments in *Bible* translation would make it impossible not to deal with multimedia translation. Many *Bible* translation projects are currently underway. Would you give priority to those concerned with multimedia translation? Which other priorities are at stake for *Bible* translation?

(Carlos Gohn – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – UFMG)

Multimedia translations are an inevitability, but unfortunately some societies that have sponsored such “translations” have not realized that the background music and actions of actors also communicate and in many instances produce meanings very different from the largely accepted interpretations. For example, in one portrayal of Jesus the directors of the production insisted that Jesus should appear somewhat esoteric and “out of this world.” As a result he seems to be a kind of religious zombie, uninvolved in this world – nothing could be worse than such a misrepresentation.

9. In your long and fruitful career you have got to know many people directly related to *Bible* translation. Would it be possible to name a few who, by some quality in their personality, caused a deep impression on you, say, either by their sense of humor, or by their capacity of endurance, or by any other relevant quality of their own?

(Carlos Gohn – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – UFMG)

It is not easy to select the names of some of the really outstanding translators that I have known because there are so many, but let me list a few: Domenique Barthelemy of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, Herman Aschmann of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, I-jin Loh, United Bible Societies and translator into Chinese, Dr. Danny Arichea of translations consultant for all of Asia for a number of years, Robert Bratcher, translator of Today's English New Testament and chairman of the committee responsible for the Old Testament, but there are so many more. At this time, however, both my files and library are inaccessible because we have just moved.

10. Does the accusation (found in Internet materials on Eugene Nida) of belonging to "Neo-orthodoxy" (meaning the reinterpreted use of words from the Bible) bother you?

(Carlos Gohn – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – UFMG)

I really do not pay attention to what I am called, which ranges from "Satan's principal tool for destroying the church" to "a true biblical scholar." My only purpose is to help people produce more meaningful and accurate translations of the Scriptures. I leave such judgements to others.

Equivalence

1. As you know, a great deal has been written about "equivalence" in translation studies. Many writers reject the term completely while others still see some use in the concept. In the light of the criticism of the term and based on your writings where this notion is essential, what are your feelings about the term at the present time?

John Robert Schmitz (Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP)

2. I am interested in the concept of (dynamic) equivalence. Many authors, including you, have tried to define it, but the opinions varied considerably. According to Taber, the concept of dynamic equivalence has been misunderstood and some translators adopted procedures which he considered improper. Even the limits between what is considered to be a linguistic translation, which you regard as “legitimate”, and a cultural translation or adaptation, which you don’t, seem to have been understood in different ways. How do you see the question of (dynamic) equivalence today, after so many controversies?

Cristina Carneiro (Universidade Estadual Paulista – UNESP – São José do Rio Preto)

I have never been fully satisfied with the phrase *dynamic equivalence* but I was trying to indicate that the relation between the original source text and its meaning is a significant relation between the linguistic form and the cultural content. A similar type of relation exists between a translation and its intended cultural content, and the combination of these two relations is a dynamic, changing pattern of relations. But to try to avoid misunderstanding, I began to use *functional equivalence* but this phrase was also subject to misinterpretation. We should have some means of talking about some complex sets of relations, but finding a fully satisfactory terminology for such complex relations is seemingly impossible.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction has contributed to dramatic changes in the notion of what translation is all about the notion of reader and also the concept of author. Could you comment on Deconstruction? Would you consider that deconstruction is what translation is all about? Would you have any criticism of deconstruction?

John Robert Schmitz (Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP)

I have never been satisfied with the term *deconstruction* nor with the various explanations. If it refers to an analysis of all the formal features of a text, that is perfectly fine, but deconstruction is only part of the difficulty of comprehension, because it is the relation between the parts of a text and their relations to the corresponding parts of the culture that are really significant. I am not satisfied with the term *deconstruction*, but I do not know how to construct any more satisfactory expression. We need more specific and detailed analyses of what we are really talking about.

Ethics of translation

In recent years there has been an awareness in the field as a need for an ethics of translation. What do you think of the concern with ethics, particularly with regard to copyright laws, domestication and foreignization of translations? Was there an ethics in force in 40s and 50s of the last century?

John Robert Schmitz (Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP)

The ethics of translation apply obviously to such matters as copyright laws, but the extent of domestication and foreignization represents a process that cannot be precisely defined. All translating involves various degrees of such alterations. Good translators have always wanted to be within the range of ethical practice, but where the lack of ethics is most evident is in the translation of prospectuses on investments political treatments of events. Salesmen and politicians find it hard to be completely honest.

Translation theories & studies

1. To what extent do you think the study of translation theories have improved the quality of translations, and, if there has been any such improvement, which theoretical currents have mainly contributed to it?

Diva Cardoso de Camargo (Universidade Estadual Paulista – UNESP – São José do Rio Preto)

Conscientious studies of what excellent translators have done in the past and are doing at present have had an enormous impact on the general practice of translating, but the communication of valid principles has been communicated and enforced primarily through reliable translation agencies that are always on the lookout for work by conscientious translators. Making translators self-conscious of the nature of their work is always a significant advance.

2. Can one assert that translation studies have before them a series of new challenges and tasks (and, if so, which are these challenges and tasks) or are we essentially re-stating and re-wording the same problems and issues – *fidelity vs. belles infidèles* and the like – which have been the staple of translational thought since Cicero, at least?

Francis Aubert (Universidade de São Paulo – USP)

I see nothing essentially new facing translators. Texts of all types have been translated for centuries, but what is new is the fact that many texts are badly written, and translators often have to rework the source texts in order to make them understandable. In business and politics texts are too often done by a group of people who are not native speakers of the language of a particular document. A committee of writers of such documents all want their own favored expressions incorporated into a document and too often there is no one person who is in a position to reorganize the document. Accordingly, translators must often engage in text reconstruction before they can even begin to translate. In general, however, translators produce texts that are superior in content and form to the originals that they are given to translate, because translators are usually far more skillful in their use of language than are the writers of the average political or monetary text.

3. The beginning of your career distinguished itself for important studies involving language description. How did the transition to the area of translation studies, and especially Bible translation, take place? To what extent did the descriptive and philological

approach of those early studies have an influence on your ideas about translation?

João Azenha Junior (Universidade de São Paulo – USP)

My ideas about translating developed while I was still an undergraduate. As a student of Classical Greek at UCLA I was never permitted to translate literally because teachers insisted that this not only gave a bad impression of the Greek text but it also seriously influenced one's own ability to write in English. As a result of studying a number of scholarly translations of the Greek and Latin classics I was convinced that most of the translations of the Bible were significantly inferior because they were so literal. If the Greek classics of Euripides, Plato, Aristophanes, and Aristotle could be translated into fully intelligible English, why not do the same for the Bible? The real stumbling block has been the tradition of "word worship". Later studies of linguistics and cultural anthropology convinced me that there are perfectly valid and useful ways of translating the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible.

Preservation of minor languages and cultures

In your book *Exploring Semantic Structures* (München, 1975, Chapter 9: "Relationship of language and culture"), you admit "the close relationship between language and culture", in such a way that "the cultural event symbolized by a word provides the denotative meaning, while the emotional response experienced by the speakers in the culture (and modeled by the culture) is the basis of the connotative meaning" which you see as a necessary one "since there is no speech without speakers and no speakers without subjective evaluations" and, consequently, "there are no words without some measure of connotation".

You also say that "we cannot anticipate the manner in which a particular language will treat any given phenomenon (two cultures may possess the very same traits, but identify and describe them in utterly diverse ways"

Nowadays, English is the predominant language in the world, where great part of new technologies and concepts are first created

and named, and then exported to the rest of the world. The present socio-economic and political structure has even been called a neocolonialism and the term “linguistic imperialism” has already been invoked.

In your opinion, what are the implications of that for the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity? What are the possible measures to be taken, if there are any, to preserve minor languages and cultures?

Éda Heloisa Pilla (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul – UFRGS)

I am personally not interested in preserving languages. Thousands of languages disappeared before the invention of writing and many more will also disappear in the future. Languages and cultures come and go. But they can only be preserved by persons who speak such languages. Trying to preserve a language by making translations is essentially a useless task. Languages are preserved by speakers, and they are the ones who must determine the relevance of their way of speaking, thinking, and acting. The life and death of languages is a cultural activity, and no translation into a primitive language will of itself preserve the language, except for purely antiquarian interests. Translations into a so-called primitive language simply opens the way into a multilingual society, where the many commercial and political interests are far more powerful than any translation of any book.

The Translator's role

In a recent interview given by Gideon Toury (to Miriam Schlesinger in July 2000), he said that the reading of your book *Science of Translation* had a tremendous impact on him: something like determining his approach to translation as a subject on its own right.

In the same interview, he said he considers it absurd when he thinks that, in his early life as translator, he treated every word and every letter in Hebrew translations as if they were precisely what the writer had written.

Does this mean that translation is an impossible procedure, in the way that when two people speak about the same subject in

two different languages they will never be saying the same thing? Then, what is the role of the translator?

Éda Heloisa Pilla (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul)

The original form of a text coming from ancient times is always subject to many influences, and it is impossible to guarantee that any reading is precisely what occurred in the original manuscript. All we have is the form of a text copied and recopied, edited and re-edited time after time. What we have is always a composite text with many influences. Textual analysis is a technique for treating scores of possible alterations of a text that have occurred through the centuries.

Language

Language taken as a structure is essentially stable and predictable. Language considered in its psychological, social, historical and cultural dimensions is variable and its manifestations often unpredictable. A text is, essentially, stable, but its readings and interpretations are/can be multiple. How, in your view, can one best deal with this inherent duality of language in translation theory and practice?

Francis Aubert (Universidade de São Paulo – USP)

Although languages appear to be stable they are all in the process of constant change. In fact, no two pronunciations of a sentence are ever identical. The interpretations of a sentence are, however, multiple because words and sentences can be related to multiple aspects of a culture. One simple way to deal with such problems is through footnotes that call attention to multiple interpretations.

Dealing with criticism

1. Your image of translation as being much like the reshuffling of cargo when transferred from one train to another (meaning reorganized, but still the same meaning) has often been subject to criticism, specially by the so-called “deconstructive” or “post-structuralist” school of thought. Would you today abandon the

analogy, perfect it or, essentially, uphold its validity?

Francis Aubert (Universidade de São Paulo – USP)

My use of the analogy of transporting the same cargo in different ways is imperfect, even as any metaphorical means of communication is entirely tentative and subject to serious misunderstanding. The analysis of texts is far more complex than the cargo analogy suggests. I try to make this very clear in the book *Contexts in Translation* to be published soon by Benjamins.

2. How do you assess the interpretations of your ideas that have been proposed, along the period of half a century, by other translation researchers? To what extent do they coincide or disagree with your own perspective on the evolution of your ideas?

João Azenha Junior (Universidade de São Paulo – USP)

I have no interest in protecting my ideas. I simply write in order to help people understand the complexity of language and culture, of which language is simply a part. I never attempt to defend what I have written, but only to recognize that what I have said in the past can probably be better said, and so I am ready to change. I am not concerned about the duality of language, but about its multiple functions.

3. Particularly in the 1980s there was considerable criticism from many directions by individuals and groups of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and other entities who were translating the *Bible* into the languages of remote communities, accusing them of attempting to inculcate these “innocent” peoples with North American values. What was/is your reply to these criticisms?

John Milton (Universidade de São Paulo – USP)

The mistake made by some translators into so-called primitive languages was to assume that translation could be carried out with only a view to reproducing the meaning of the text, but in many instances the translators were very naïve about the actual meanings resulting from centuries of textual tradition. But as they have become more aware of literary criticism, the history of

ancient texts, and the evident varieties of interpretation (depending on the biblical cultures and the distinctive cultures of various Christian entities), they have become more astute in their evaluations of meanings of texts and more open to biblical studies and research.