The impact of translation theory on the development of contextual theology

Christina M. Melick
The University of Toledo

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A Thesis

entitled

The Impact of Translation Theory
on the
Development of Contextual Theology

by
Christina Melick

as partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Bachelor of Arts Degree
with Honors
in
Linguistics

Thesis Directors: Dr. Dorothy Siegel
Dr. Richard Gaillardetz

Honors Adviser: Dr. Melissa Valiska Gregory
Honors Program Director: Dr. Thomas E. Barden

The University of Toledo

DECEMBER 2007
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dorothy Siegel, Richard Gaillardetz, and Melissa Gregory for their invaluable help and guidance for this project. I would also like to thank Linn Boese and the Nyarafolo translation team for sharing their knowledge and experience in translation with me, and for giving me the opportunity to actually do a little bit of translating myself. It was there in Ferke that I first discovered a love of translating. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, who have always encouraged me to follow my dreams and have believed in me even when I couldn’t believe in myself.
Abstract

I argue that as Bible translators worked in non-Western cultures and languages, they, along with the people in these cultures, realized that some words cannot be divorced from their cultural context and connotations. This idea inevitably led them to conclude that each culture also has their own unique viewpoint of God, faith, and reality, which was essentially the birth of contextual theology. This was a major shift from classical theological thought which saw theology as more of a scientific description of God and faith, which implies that it is universal, the same for every person in every culture.

I begin by discussing the issue of meaning within the context of translation. What actually happens during translation? Can the meaning of a text actually be transferred to another language? To investigate this idea, I examine two key ideas within translation studies: untranslatability and equivalence, namely what aspects of a text may be untranslatable and what type of equivalence between the source and target language texts is possible and desirable. I conclude that the way in which a translator solves these problems leads to a unique new work of art. Next, I relate this conclusion to the key premise of contextual theology, that theology cannot be separated from cultural context, although each person can gain a deeper, fuller view of God by studying other cultures’ theologies. I will particularly focus on the synthesis model of contextual theology, as described by Stephen Bevans, which is particularly well suited to showing the influence of translation theory. Ultimately I conclude that the development of contextual theology would not have occurred without the changes in translation theory prompted by the act of Bible translation.
**Introduction**

Although translation has long been an important tool for communication, it is only in the last century that scholars have begun to study it in depth, which produced important results. Bible translation is the largest translation enterprise in many ways. The Bible itself contains many types of discourse: history, law, proverbs, poetry, narrative, etc. It has been translated into a great number of languages, including almost every language family. Because of the large number of Bible translations, it has been performed by the largest number of translators. So as linguistics and other fields of study offered important new theories about translation, Bible translators found it necessary to not only engage in translation work themselves, but to also apply new theories to their work. In doing so, they discovered that meaning is partially bound by language and culture. This discovery made it necessary for them to more explicitly recognize the need for contextual theology, in which people of every culture relate to God in their own unique way.

Translators of both secular and religious texts have always given thought to the methods they use, but linguists in translation studies have brought a more scientific approach to translation. Traditionally translators have laid out general principles to follow. For example:

…the best translating is out of Latyn into English, to translate after the sentence and not oneli after the wordis, so that the sentence be as opin, either openere, in English as in Latyn, and go not fer fro the letter; and if the letter mai not be suid [followed] in the translating, tet the sence euere be hool and open. (John Purvey, qtd. in Orlinsky and Bratcher 17-18)
But linguists study the universal aspects of language and the similarities and differences between specific languages. Then they apply this knowledge to translation by studying the translation problems that arise because of differences between languages and searching for solutions to these problems based on similarities between languages. This is the area in which Bible translators have the most to contribute to translation studies; a quick survey of the field will show that the majority of the field deals only with translation between European languages, while Bible translators work in many different languages. One of the major problems linguists have studied is that of equivalence and untranslatability. “Equivalence” is the idea that a translation should be faithful to the original text. Scholars agree that total equivalence is not possible, but that different aspects of the original must be present in the translation. They deem different aspects necessary based on the type and purpose of the translation. By viewing meaning as partially language and culture bound, scholars realize that although some words cannot be separated from their cultural context, a creative translator can express the important aspects of the original text in his translation. The creative solutions that translators come up with can even make a translation not just a bland copy of the original, but a beautiful work of art in itself.

In the last few centuries Bible translators have increasingly worked in non-Western cultures that provided a cultural context different from that of the European countries that have been the Christian authorities for over a thousand years. In these diverse cultural contexts both the translators and the people they were translating for began to realize that people of different cultures must express their belief in God in culturally relevant ways. This is clearly shown in the way that translators decided to use
local names for God, which allowed non-Western people to connect the new Christian ideas to their own.

To investigate these ideas, this paper begins with a discussion of relevant developments in translation theory, specifically in the areas of meaning, equivalence, and untranslatability. Since scholars in the field of translation studies have such diverse opinions, this section focuses on Eugene Nida’s work, which is most relevant to the subsequent discussion. The next section gives a brief overview of the role translation has played in Christianity and the way in which Bible translators’ theories have evolved. The final section defines contextual theology and discusses the ways in which translation theory developments were an essential component in the development of contextual theology.
1. Translation Theory

Translators have plied their trade for thousands of years, but until the middle of the twentieth century, there was little formal work in translation theory. This meant that there was no clear idea about what actually happened when a text was translated; there was just the vague idea that a text was being transmitted from one language to another. According to popular understanding of translation, there is some underlying, supra-lingual Meaning, and a translator first attempts to discover this Meaning from the original text in the source language (SL) and then transfer it to a target language (TL), producing a translated text. This process could be diagrammed as follows:

Fig. 1

So to translate a sentence like “The cat ate an apple,” a translator first analyzes the Meaning of the sentence, what it’s actually saying: there is something (a cat) performing an action (eating) on another thing (an apple) at certain point in time (the past). Once the translator has discovered the Meaning, he transfers it to another language: *le chat a mangé une pomme*. This conception of translation presupposes that any text can be
translated effortlessly from one language to another, since the translator can always discover the true Meaning of the text and this Meaning is easily expressed in each language. It frequently assumes that a word, or possibly phrase, can be found that is a close match in the TL, resulting in a literal translation. Literal translation allows certain changes in word order that are required to make sentences that follow the TL’s grammar, but it generally attempts to maintain grammatical categories by translating nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs, etc., keep original phrases together, be consistent in word usage, and reproduce meanings in terms of source context, often translating idioms literally (Nida 165).

In the 20th century, translation studies came into being as an academic discipline, and scholars began to ask some of the following questions: Is a translation an exact equivalent of the original, just in a different language? Or is the meaning of the text somehow changed in translation? If the meaning is changed in translation, how can the losses be minimized, or should they be? Is anything gained in translation? Although translation studies involve many different disciplines, linguists have made important contributions to the field, both by applying linguistic theories to translation and by producing linguistic theories of translation (Fawcett 2).

One of the first, and most foundational, developments in translation theory was to show that literal translation often produces major problems of intelligibility. Although these translations technically follow TL grammar, they often produce sentences that seem strange and may even be unintelligible to the average reader. For example, below is first a literal translation of 1 Peter 2:7-8 and then a more idiomatic translation:

For you therefore that believe is the preciousness: but for such as disbelieve, The stone which the builders rejected, The same was made the head of the corner; and,
A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; for they stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. (ASV)

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. (NIV)

Because of these problems with literal translation, a “freer” translation process is needed to produce equivalence in translation. There is no unified theory of translation, although scholars do agree that total equivalence is impossible. Werner Koller lists five ‘frames of reference’ that would need to be included in total equivalence:

- denotational meaning – the object or concept referred to
- connotational meaning – includes language level (poetic, formal, familiar, slang, etc.), sociolect, dialect, medium, style, value (positive/negative), emotional tone (neutral, cold, warm, etc.)
- textual norms – type of language normally used in legal texts, procedural, narrative, etc.
- pragmatic meaning – reader expectations
- linguistic form - rhyme, rhythm, metaphor, etc. (qtd. in Fawcett 531)

Equivalence is one of the most discussed topics within translation theory and scholars debate which features are most important, or even possible, in making an “equivalent” translation, with different priority given to different features depending on the genre (poetry, prose, etc) and purpose of the translation. Given this fact, it will be necessary to focus on one theory for a specific purpose. But as any discussion of equivalence must first address a crucial linguistic issue, namely, where meaning resides, I will address meaning before returning to equivalence.
There are several possibilities of where meaning actually resides. One possibility is shown in Figure 1, in which meaning is outside of language. In this model, language would simply describe an external reality, and this description would be fairly equivalent across languages and cultures. On the surface, this idea seems to have some merit. Most people would say that concrete things, like ‘you’, ‘me’, ‘the sun’, ‘a tree’, and ‘food’ would be found universally and would be simple to translate. But upon closer examination, this supposition falls apart. One of the most obvious ways it fails can be seen in the different connotations of words with the same denotation. Although ‘the sun’ generally indicates the same physical referent, in some cultures it actually refers to a life-giving, pleasantly warm light in the sky, while for other cultures, it refers to a harsh, burning light that is avoided whenever possible (Bevans ix). In some languages, ‘you’ refers to any number of people from one to infinity, and doesn’t specify any specific social relationship, while in others the concept of ‘you’ is divided into separate words to specify degrees of formality and different numbers of people. Even the notions ‘in front of’ and ‘behind’ vary from culture to culture. When looking at several cups on a shelf in a cupboard, you, as an American, would probably say that the one closest to you is in the front. But a Nyarafolo person would say that the cup closest to them is behind the others (Boese). This is because to them, the cups on the shelf are marching in line, so in the example of the cups, the line moves in the direction you are facing, making you at the end of the line. This makes the closest cup the last one in line, so it is behind the others. As these examples reveal, meaning as an objective supra-lingual reality must be rejected. So what else might it be?
An alternate possibility would be reminiscent of the Sapir-Whorf theory, in which language determines what we think by limiting the ways a person can describe reality and express his thoughts; therefore, meaning exists only within language. In this theory, each language classifies reality in ways that are unique to that language. Because of this theory’s combination of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity, if it were true, translation would not really be possible because certain ideas would expressible in only one language, and hence could not be transferred to another. Because there are many successful translations, we must rule out this possibility as well.

A third possibility would be a compromise between these two in which there is an external reality described by language, but some meaning is found only within a certain culture, language, text or utterance. For example, poetry often exhibits much more of this text-dependent meaning with specific combinations of images, rhyme, alliteration, etc. that typically cannot be reproduced in the TL text. Other words or images may have specific cultural meanings that are not necessarily a characteristic of external reality. To an American, the phrase “As he walked into the sunset, a bald eagle soared overhead,” is not just a simple statement of the situation in which a man went somewhere; the combination of the facts that the subject is a man, that he’s heading west (into the sunset) and that it is a bald eagle soaring overhead give the image a sense of independence and a pioneering spirit. This phrase would not have the same meaning for a person of another culture in which the West and bald eagles have no special meaning. Even within the English language, these same words do not convey this same vivid sense when they are used independently. Although this meaning is technically culture-bound, language and culture are often so intertwined that a word in one language refers to specific cultural
beliefs, so the two cannot always be separated. Meaning, therefore, would be partially outside language and partially within language. This idea seems to be closer to the truth than the other two, so although it may not be as precise as we desire, I will use it in the following discussion.

If meaning resides partially outside of language and culture and partially within, then we must revise our concept of translation. This new conception of translation must be somewhat messier, because if meaning is contained partly within language, there is no easy, direct one-to-one translation in many cases, and many translations are possible for a single text into a single target language. Our new concept of translation might be represented as in Figure 2 below:

Fig. 2

As this figure shows, the part of the meaning that is outside of the language is preserved in the translations while the part inside language changes its shape during translation. Since the meaning is not completely supra-lingual, the translation goes straight from SL to TL instead of requiring the two-step process of SL to Meaning to TL. Of course, a translator must analyze the SL meaning before transferring it to the TL, but this analysis takes place completely within the SL. Most translation scholars agree that there is some sort of ‘essence’ of a text that must be present in any translation to qualify it as such.
rather than as a cultural adaptation or a new text based on the original. Thus, we need to return to a consideration of equivalence. Specifically, we need to discuss which aspects of the original must be present in a translation.

Translation scholars generally think of equivalence as existing along a sliding scale, with the translation ranging from what is commonly called “literal” to “free”:

**Fig. 3**

The terms “literal” and “free” are not very accurate or precise so most scholars create other terms to denote these two ends of the scale, and divide the scale differently. A more “literal” translation is typically word-for-word and attempts to follow the SL grammatical structure as closely as possible, while a more “free” translation is typically a thought-for-thought translation and tends to use more idiomatic TL grammatical structures. Scholars avoid the use of the term “free” because it has a connotation of not being faithful to the original text, which is not necessarily true of the so-called free translations. Because of the diverse ways in which different scholars divide and name the segments of the equivalence scale, I will focus on only one relevant theory in this paper.

One of the first and most well known attempts to define and classify equivalence was Nida’s *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), in which he differentiated between what he called “formal correspondence” and “dynamic equivalence”. The remainder of
this paper depends heavily on Nida’s work because his theories were the most influential in the development of contextual theology. As a Bible translator himself, Nida’s work represents the trends in translation theory used for Bible translation at that time. Contextual theology was influenced specifically by translation theory as applied to translation of the Bible. Although in some ways Nida’s work was new and was subsequently used to train Bible translators, it was also a description of what at least some translators were already doing in the field.

Although Nida’s book does address a broader theory of translation and has had great influence in the academic sphere, it focuses on Bible translation, specifically, the translation problems that arise and the practices used in translating the Bible into non-Western languages. This book is more theoretical and grounded in linguistic theory than his book *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (written in 1969 with Charles Taber), which is basically a handbook for translators. The unique feature of Nida’s translation theory is his claim that the purpose of translation is to produce the same reaction in the receptor of the translated message as the original receptors would have had (*Theory and Practice* 1). While other scholars sometimes desire this as well, their focus is usually on the text itself, rather than on the readers. Nida’s translation method is to take the original surface structure, break it down into its kernels (back transformation), reproduce these kernels in the receptor language (transfer), and then transform these into receptor language surface structure (transformation) (Nida, *Toward a Science* 68-9).

Kernels are the deep structures of elementary sentences, sentences with no embedded clauses. Kernels are the source of the variety of structures that ultimately result from the application of what linguists call “transformations.” Nida observes that although
kernel structures are not the same in every language, they are much more closely related than “the more elaborated transforms” (Toward a Science 66). They designate either an event (‘to run’), object (‘a dog’), abstract (‘red’), or relational (‘and’). So the phrase “my angry shout” would be broken down into the kernel “I shout angrily”, which could also be transformed to other structures such as “the angriness of my shout” or “my shout was angry”. Kernels usually represent events as verbs, objects as nouns, and abstracts as adjectives or adverbs.

As previously stated, Nida’s equivalence scale runs from formal correspondence to dynamic equivalence. Nida defines formal correspondence as “designed to reveal as much as possible of the form and content of the original message”. On the extreme end of this side of the equivalence scale would be an interlinear gloss, such as the following gloss of a Nyarafolo story (for the complete text see Appendix):

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{Donc } \text{mi } \text{nè } \text{wàa } \text{Gbambalivogo } \text{mè} \\
\text{So } \text{I } \text{HAB go } \text{Gbambalivogo } \text{to} \\
\text{nè } \text{Kuloceliè } \text{sièn rè } \text{nuu } \text{dè } \text{tèngèfoli } \text{mè } \text{bèlè,} \\
\text{and } \text{God’s } \text{words } \text{talk.about } \text{DET.G4 believer to } \text{DET.G1P}, \\
\text{tèngèfoli } \text{bàlì } \text{bièlè } \text{baà } \text{Gbambalivogo } \text{nè } \text{gè.} \\
\text{believer } \text{DET.PROX.G1P } \text{G1P.ID there } \text{Gbambalivogo } \text{in } \text{DET.G2S}
\end{array}
\]

A general formal correspondence translation tries to preserve as much of the original form as possible while still generally following TL grammar, which means that it is essentially a literal translation as described above (p. 5). The following is such a translation of the same text:

So, I often go to Gbambalivogo and talk about God’s word to the believers, those believers who are there in Gbambalivogo.
On the other hand, a dynamic equivalence translation aims to produce a TL text that uses “the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message” (Nida Toward a Science 166). This means that it does, ideally, faithfully reproduce the meaning of the SL text in the translation, but it does it in a way that is meaningful and intelligible in the TL. Dynamic equivalence’s focus on the naturalness of the translation means that translators attempt not only to get the meaning correct but also to produce a similar style. Here is a dynamic equivalence translation of the above text:

So, I often go to the village of Gbambalivogo to preach to the believers there.

It is easiest to see the difference between formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence in an area of text that has “untranslatable” elements, as these are what require a departure from formal correspondence.

It is almost impossible to discuss equivalence without discussing untranslatability. The idea of untranslatability is just that: since total equivalence is impossible, some aspects of a text cannot be translated. What aspects of a text are untranslatable? What should translators do when they encounter untranslatable elements? Again, scholars have different answers to these questions. Ironically, the one thing that they seem to agree on is that these “untranslatable” elements do not prevent translation. They deem some elements unimportant, and thus unnecessary to translate, and devise various methods for translating the important, although supposedly untranslatable, elements. The issue of untranslatability is especially important in poetry translation where the specific sounds, rhythm and meter are important to the text. These elements are generally among the most
difficult to reproduce, so poetry translators often have to settle for including only some of them in a translation.

In *Le Ton beau de Marot*, Douglas Hofstadter provides many different translations of a single poem by Clément Marot, each focusing on preserving different elements of the original. Below is the original with a list of 10 of its formal characteristics:

**A une Damoyselle malade**

*Ma mignonne,*  
*Je vous donne*  
*Le bon jour ;*  
*Le séjour*  
*C’est prison.*  
*Guérison*  
*Recourez*  
*Puis ouvrez*  
*Votre porte*  
*Et qu’on sorte*  
*Vivement,*  
*Car Clément*  
*Le vous mande.*  
*Va, friande*  
*De ta bouche,*  
*Qui se couche*  
*En danger*  
*Pour manger*  
*Confitures ;*  
*Si tu dures*  
*Trop malade,*  
*Couleur fade*  
*Tu prendras,*  
*Et perdras*  
*L’embonpoint.*  
*Dieu te doint*  
*Santé bonne,*  
*Ma mignonne.*  
*(Hofstadter 1b)*

1. [The poem] is exactly 28 lines long.  
2. The lines of the poem have just three syllables.  
3. The stress always falls on the final syllable of a line.  
5. Midway through, the poet shifts from [formal] “vous” to [informal] “tu”.  
6. Midway through, the poet refers to himself by name.  
8. The first line and last line of the poem are identical.  
9. The language of the poem is 500-year-old French.  
10. [The poem] is sweet and light in tone.  
    *(Hofstadter 30b)*

Following are the first few lines of several translations of this poem. On the left is a literal translation that maintained three syllables per line with the accent on the final syllable. On the right is a translation by Robert French that maintains the same rhyme scheme as the original and contains three syllables per line with the accent on the final
syllable; the style and word choice suggest that it could have been written in the same era as the original. Despite maintaining all these formal characteristics, it departs from a literal, word-for-word translation, sometimes shifting the meaning of lines (as you can see below, the thought contained in line 5 in the original is carried over to line 6), and later adding ‘honeyed ham’ to the poem. Below these two is a translation by Anthony Guneratne that makes the poem into a sonnet. Although this departs significantly from the original structure, it does maintain the repetition of the first line at the end and the self-reference by the poet and gives it the sense of the same historical period, along with preserving much of the content of the original.

My sweet maid
You I wish
A good day;
Your sickbed
Is a jail.
(Hofstadter 3b)

Fairest friend
Let me send
My embrace.
Quit this place,
Its dark halls
And dank walls.
(Hofstadter 8b)

O sweeting mine, my words I pray you heed.
I would that every day be fair and fine,
Inviting you to come forth with Godspeed,
Recover’d, from the place where you repine.
(Hofstadter 60b)

These three translations show that in poetry, it is usually impossible to reproduce every feature of the original and maintain a close word-for-word translation of the meaning of the original poem. In order to give a poetic translation the same life and beauty of the original, it is essentially necessary to write a new poem, so the lines between a translation and a different poem based on the original become blurry. For example, Hofstadter claims that the Guneratne translation is indeed a translation because it exudes the spirit of the original and maintains many of the formal features and meaning.
(60a). Others might claim that it represents too great a departure from the original to be called a translation.

While some scholars see untranslatability as producing loss in a translation, others, like Hofstadter, see it as an opportunity for creativity and as a challenge. In fact, it is precisely the untranslatable elements of a text that make a translator necessary. If it weren’t for these, almost anyone using a grammar and a dictionary for the TL could produce a translation. At least at this time, there is no scientific way to produce a “correct” translation for these untranslatable elements, so translators must find a way to translate the important aspects of the original text.

Although Nida does not specifically discuss untranslatability, he does discuss the types of translation problems usually found in this discussion, some of which deal with culture-bound meaning. He deals with them mainly as areas of “adaptation” in a dynamic equivalence translation (Nida Toward a Science 167-8). He discusses two categories of adaptations: grammar and lexicon. Of the two, grammatical adaptations are typically easier to make, since most of them involve obligatory changes: word order changes, translating nouns as verbs, etc. Nida identifies three lexical levels that may require adaptation. The first level contains terms with easily identified TL parallels that usually do not present a problem. These are words like “river, tree, stone, knife, etc.” (Nida Toward a Science 167). The second level contains words that refer to different objects in each culture that have similar functions. For example, ‘book’ in English means “an object with pages bound together into a unit” but in New Testament culture meant “a long parchment or papyrus rolled up in the form of a scroll (Nida Toward a Science 167). These words, or other idioms or phrases that present the same problem, often require a
translator to choose between a translation that preserves the form of the referent and one that preserves its function. The third class contains “cultural specialties” – terms which must retain some of their “foreign associations” in translation. This class contains words like ‘Pharisees’, ‘synagogue’, and ‘cherubim’. If the translator attempts to translate these words by using a TL cultural equivalent, he will create a cultural adaptation rather than a translation. A cultural adaptation removes the SL text from its cultural setting and creates a completely new text based on the original. So a cultural adaptation of the earlier Nyarafolo text in which the narrator is made into a University of Toledo student leading a Bible study would be as follows:

So, every week I go to the Huddle in Carter and lead a Bible study with some freshman girls that live there who are Christians.

In the case of the second level of adaptations listed above, a translator must consider his audience in order to choose between preserving the form and content of the textual element. In the example above, when translating from a biblical text, ‘book’ represents the content while ‘scroll’ represents the form. ‘Scroll’ would be the best choice in a translation for an intended audience that is familiar with the source culture, perhaps people who have grown up attending a Christian church. ‘Scroll’ would also be the best option for a translation for an audience that wants to get the sense of the original text, like seminary students. ‘Book’ would be the best choice when the receptors are not familiar with the SL culture and the purpose of the translation is for them to understand the message of the text. This is the case in many translations done by missionaries for non-Western languages spoken by people who have only recently been exposed to Christianity.
Nida recommends various methods for making these adaptations in order to translate important “untranslatable” elements. I will highlight a few of these methods as examples. One of the most basic is to use classifiers with transliterated names of items in the third class listed above (cultural specialties). For example, ‘city Jerusalem’, ‘jewel ruby’, or ‘cherubim angels’ (Nida Toward a Science 230). Since these cultural specialties must be used in the text although receptors have no understanding of the terms, the classifiers give the receptors a general idea of what the term is, i.e., a ruby is a type of jewel, Jerusalem is a specific city, and cherubim are types of angels. Oftentimes, a classifier will suffice to provide the information needed for the receptor to understand the passage. Other times, more specific information is needed, in which Nida recommends the use of footnotes. He recommends the use of footnotes for the following functions:

(1) to correct linguistic and cultural discrepancies, e.g. (a) explain contradictory customs, (b) identify unknown geographical or physical objects, (c) give equivalents of weights and measures, (d) provide information on plays on words, (e) include supplementary data on proper names…; and (2) to add information which may be generally useful in understanding the historical and cultural background of the document in question (Nida Toward a Science 239).

Although footnotes may not be the most elegant solution, they are often necessary when the SL and TL are far removed either culturally or linguistically.

It is clear that Nida’s concept of translation is very similar to the one represented in Figure 2. He describes the process of translation as involving the transfer of kernels in the SL to kernels in the TL, without any reference to any sort of supra-lingual Meaning. He also describes the translation problems that occur because of words with culture-bound meaning, and suggests creative methods for solving them.

Nida’s work, although it has broader implications, is specifically focused on the unique situation he faced. In the last few centuries, missionaries began to engage non-
Western cultures on a much greater scale than before. As missionaries, Bible translators’
goals in translation were unique. Most literary translation, even today, happens between
similar cultures, and when it crosses large cultural gaps, its goal has often been to show
the exotic aspects of the source text and culture. But missionary Bible translators
routinely worked with languages and cultures very different from those in which the
Bible was written, and their goal was not to showcase an exotic culture, but instead to
make the message of the text relevant and understandable to those who read it. Some
have criticized Nida’s theory because they fail to take this specific purpose into
consideration; they assume either that all readers are literary critics or that they are
Biblical experts using translations as an aid to understand the original Greek or Hebrew
texts (Smalley 123-24). Others criticize the theory for failing to transmit broader textual
meanings, often conveyed by form, and instead focusing only on meaning at a phrase or
maybe paragraph level (Smalley 132). This criticism is valid, as transferring these
broader meanings is not emphasized in Nida’s work, but his theory does not specifically
condone ignoring them. In practice, it is up to individual translators to take these things
into consideration.

Despite this criticism, many Bible translators in non-Western cultures adopted
Nida’s theory. As they began to use this theory, they quickly began to realize that it had
broader implications for their faith, which eventually led to the development of
contextual theology. This development will be treated in the next two sections.
2. Bible Translation

Translation has always been essential to the spread of Christianity, which is based on the message of the Bible. Lamin Sanneh compares the views of Christians and Muslims on the translatability of their Scriptures in Translating the Message (1989). Their views seem to have at least some basis in beliefs about language and translatability in general. Both religions believe their Scriptures to be the word of God, and so they place high importance on the accurate transmission of the message contained in the Scriptures to converts. Sanneh claims that Muslims believe Arabic to be a revealed language because it is the language used to write the Qur’an. Their belief in its untranslatability is based on Arabic’s “inimitable eloquence” (Sanneh 212). Christians, however, believe that the Bible contains the word of God and that this message should be shared with everyone. Furthermore, they believe that the best way to accomplish this is to translate into languages that people already understand, rather than trying to get them to learn the languages the Bible was originally written in (Sanneh).

In deciding how to translate the Bible, Christians are faced with several theological issues. One important issue is whether terminology from a traditional non-Christian religion can be used in a translation of the Bible. One view holds that in a language with no established Christian terminology, a translation should not use the language of the traditional religion because it will reinforce this religion and distort Christianity’s message. Instead, proponents of this view recommend borrowing Christian
terms from Greek, Latin, or a dominant local language (Smalley 91-2). The opposite view recommends using terminology from the traditional language whenever possible because this will enrich the Christian message. Proponents of this view believe that overtones from the traditional religion that are contrary to the Gospel will eventually be aligned to Christian beliefs through Christian usage. In particular, they believe that it is important to use a traditional name for God, because a borrowed name would falsely, in their opinion, imply that He is foreign and was not present in their past.

Another theological issue faced in Bible translation is the inspiration or authority credited to different translations. Although this topic actually encompasses several more complex issues, for this paper it will suffice to say that on one end of the spectrum are those who believe that the original versions of each Bible are the only ones inspired by God, and thus the only ones with the authority to serve as the basis for translation. A slightly weaker version of this view is that the originals are the only ones with the authority to serve as the basis for translation, but that the Holy Spirit works through translators. This is the view held by most modern missionary translators, although some have had to base their work on other translations when there was no one who knew the original languages. In these cases, they usually consulted commentaries and other resources to understand as much of the originals as possible (Smalley 93-5).

Meanwhile, others at various points in history have believed that certain translations were divinely inspired and therefore they believed that these translations could serve as the basis for other translations. The two translations most commonly viewed in this way are the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate translations. The Septuagint is a Jewish translation of the Old Testament into Greek that was seen as
“divinely inspired, executed, and authorized…to the point of actual canonization” (Orlinsky and Bratcher 2). It was used by the early Christian church, and in the fourth century, Jerome was even criticized for using the original Hebrew instead of the Septuagint as the basis for his Latin translation. Later, his translation, the Latin Vulgate, also achieved authoritative status within the Western church, and was used as the basis for all translations (Smalley 94).

Although Christians have practiced translation since Christianity’s beginning, the method of translation has changed significantly from primarily literal translation to primarily dynamic equivalence translation based on the authoritative views on the issues above. Christians originally thought that since the Bible was God’s word, it should be translated literally so that the translator would not be changing God’s word (Orlinsky and Bratcher 4). For this reason, the first two major translations of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Greek Septuagint and the Aramaic Targums, are literal translations, although the Targums manifest the authoritative Jewish interpretation of the Scriptures (Orlinsky and Bratcher 4). Since this was the traditional method of translating the Bible, Jerome’s Latin translation was criticized for being too free and Judaizing the text by going back to the original Hebrew rather than the Septuagint version of the Old Testament (Orlinsky and Bratcher 14). As Christians began to realize that these literal translations could not be understood by most people because they didn’t know the original languages that the Bible had been written in, translators, like Martin Luther, began to translate using the vernacular language commonly spoken by people. The issue of traditional religious terminology has been debated most vigorously within the modern missionary movement, and the shift to promoting religious terminology is one of the
major factors for both the decision to use dynamic equivalence translation and the development of contextual theology. The next section will explore this issue more thoroughly.
3. Contextual Theology

As a consequence of the importance Christians place on translating the Bible, it is one of the most translated texts in the world. Furthermore, Bible translators have made important theoretical contributions to the study of translation and have also provided many examples of translation problems and their possible solutions. In turn, developments in translation studies have influenced the development of contextual theology. Before discussing this, it is important to understand what contextual theology is, in contrast to the classical view of theology. The classical view, which most Western Christians have held for centuries, sees theology as a sort of objective scientific description of God and faith, a truth outside any culturally-bound expression that we humans just need to discover through scientific inquiry, as represented by Figure 4 below:

![Fig. 4](image-url)
In this figure, people from different cultures all use scientific inquiry to produce a theology which describes God (who is part of a supra-cultural reality). Because doing theology is seen as a type of scientific endeavor, the system of theology it produces would be supra-cultural and universal, like a mathematical proof. Classical theologians do not necessarily believe that this type of theology will yield complete understanding of God or some kind of universal proof of his existence. Rather, there are some things about God that must be taken on faith. However, the principles revealed by theology would be universal and relevant to people of every culture.

On the other hand, contextual theology is actually a method of doing theology or a type of theology, but it is not a specific system of theology. Although many contextual theologians would say that absolute reality and God exist independently of culture, humans cannot completely comprehend them, and so reality only takes on meaning for us within the context of our own culture and historical period. This is the key point in contextual theology: we can only have an understanding of God within a specific cultural context; we cannot comprehend every aspect of him. So many Latin Americans see God as a liberator freeing them from oppression, while Asians influenced by the Buddhist values of self-denial and detachment may primarily see God as denying himself to come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and ultimately giving up his own life (Bevans 91-92). Even the classical view of theology is, in a sense, contextual, because it was customized for Western culture. Because each contextual theology has a unique view of God, people from different cultures can learn from each other’s theologies. Contextual theology may be represented by Figure 5 on the next page in which each culture sees God
through the lens of its own contextual theology but gains new insights from other cultures’ theologies.

Notice that in Figure 4, both God and theology are supra-cultural universals, while in Figure 5, only God is supra-cultural but theology only exists within a specific cultural context.

Stephan Bevans describes several different models of contextual theology, including the translation model, the anthropological model, the praxis model, the synthetic model, and the transcendental model. These models are different ways of understanding contextual theology, and each emphasizes different aspects of it. For example, the translation model emphasizes the importance of the unchanging gospel message, and tries to express the essence of this message in culturally appropriate terms (Bevans 30). The anthropological model emphasizes the goodness of each culture and strives to preserve the cultural identity of a Christian (Bevans 47). The synthetic model falls somewhere in between these two. It takes the gospel message seriously, but it
attempts to incorporate culture as well. It also sees the value of other cultures’
expressions of faith and seeks to learn from them (Bevans 81-83).

The influence of modern translation theory is most evident in the synthetic model.
It sees God’s revelation of himself in the Bible as a specific, “culturally conditioned
message” (Bevans 84) which is still relevant in other cultural contexts. In doing theology,
a person must emphasize the message at some points and one’s one cultural identity at
other points (Bevans 85). When theology is done in this way, people from every culture
can relate to God in a way that is meaningful to them. In the same way, a translator must
be faithful to the specific content of the original text, but he must use the rich resources of
the TL to express the message in a way that is intelligible and meaningful to TL readers.
The text being translated generally has some kind of relevance to its intended audience,
but it must be put in idiomatic TL structures so that they can understand it. When
dynamic equivalence is used to create a translation with the same vibrancy as the
original, its readers are able to fully engage with the text and appreciate in the same way
as the original text’s readers.

The most obvious way in which translation theory has influenced the
development of contextual theology is by the contribution of the dynamic equivalence
definition of translation. The development of the dynamic equivalence theory as opposed
to formal correspondence is an integral part of the translation model of contextual
theology, although Bevans’s analysis of Nida’s theory is a little off. He says that like
Nida’s kernels in language, the translation model is based on the idea of a supra-cultural
gospel ‘kernel’ being surrounded by a “disposable, nonessential cultural husk” (Bevans
33). Although theologians disagree about exactly what comprises the gospel kernel, they
do agree that there is some sort of universal gospel message that needs to be translated into a culturally appropriate mode of expression. The translation model emphasizes the importance of the priority of the message of the gospel over cultural considerations (Bevans 34), in the same way that one of translators’ primary concerns is equivalence. The difference between Nida’s concept of translation and the translation model of contextual theology is that Nida sees meaning as always embedded in language, while these theologians see the gospel as supra-cultural. However, any translator recognizes that there is some sort of essential message in a text that must be present in a translation for it to be classified as such, so the model still works. In the same way that a translator can translate some parts of a text almost word-for-word but must sometimes creatively find a way to express a SL idiom in a TL that has no such idiom, a theologian following the translation model sees some aspects of theology as generally universal, but others need to be adapted more to the culture (Bevans 35-36).

Besides providing a model, translation has been important to the development of contextual theology because the same issues that led to important developments in translation theory also led theologians to see a need for the development of contextual theology. As Bible translation became a major enterprise after the Protestant Reformation, and particularly as it began to engage non-Western cultures and their languages, Bible translators began to wrestle with many of the linguistic translation issues discussed above, particularly the idea of equivalence in the translation of culture-bound idioms and ideas. They eventually realized that the best way to accomplish this was the “adoption of indigenous terms and concepts for the central categories of the Bible” (Sanneh 166), particularly the name used for God. When missionary Bible
translators were testing different terms to use for the name of God, they realized that even if they used a transliterated form of a European name for God, the speakers of the non-Western language would still understand this name as referring to their own God. By using the indigenous name for God, they recognized that God had been present in the area before their arrival. This also showed the speakers that their own cultural values and ideas were important and because of this, they began to believe that the God of the Bible was not just a European God, but that he was their God as well. They then began to formulate their own unique way of approaching God. Eventually the missionaries also realized that it was important for everyone to relate to God in a way that made sense in their own cultures.

Using the indigenous name for God is not without problems. By using this name, the missionaries and new Christians had to account for aspects of local traditions concerning God that did not fit with the Christian view of God. For example, the Cebaara creator god, Kolocoloo, is female, and after creating the world, she became angry with people after one woman hit Kolocoloo’s foot while pounding grain, so she left the people in the hands of evil spirits. One of the most obvious issues Cebaaras faced was the gender of the deity. Their solution to this issue was that, as Numbers 23:19 says, “God is not a man, that he should lie,” so God does not have gender. The rest of the Cebaaras’ traditional knowledge of God came from sorceresses, so the Christians taught that God himself had given mankind the truth in the stories written in the Bible, and they should be believed over the false stories sorceresses told (van den Berg).

As people increasingly began to believe in the validity of their own cultural way of relating to God, professional theologians took notice and began to take contextual
theology seriously. Christians had been contextualizing theology since the time of Christ, but theologians didn’t recognize this fact until recently, after Bible translators began to view meaning as partially culture-bound (Bosch 421). Especially since the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the dominant group within Christianity has determined their own theology, and anything that differed from this was regarded as unorthodox, or even heretical (Bosch 421). If meaning is viewed as at least partially culture-bound, and Christianity is based largely on a text (the Bible), then there are only two options for the spread of Christianity: (1) converts must acquire a “Christian” culture or (2) the gospel must be presented in a way that is unique and meaningful to each culture. The first option has many problems: Which culture would converts adopt? Western culture? A biblical culture? Which one? The nomadic Hebrew culture of parts of the Old Testament? The Jewish culture of the gospels? The Greek culture of the recipients of many of Paul’s letters? Would it even be possible for them to acquire a new culture in a way that would enable them to really understand the gospel? Christianity has always spread mainly through translation (Sanneh), which encourages Christians to take the second option and understand God and Christianity in their own cultural terms. Many scholars point to Christ’s incarnation and Pentecost as Biblical models for translation. Christians believe that God came to earth in human form as Jesus Christ; this was God entering the “human culture” and relating to humans in a way that we could understand. At Pentecost, the first major manifestation of the Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to speak in the languages of every person there. These two events also show Christians that God approves of translation. Throughout Acts and many of the
epistles, we can see the struggle the Gentiles go through to contextualize their beliefs, and since that time Christianity has flourished most where it was contextualized.
Conclusion

In many ways, contextual theology has existed since the time of the New Testament, when Greeks began to convert to Christianity. But until recently, Western theologians generally did not recognize its legitimacy. As Bible translators aimed for dynamic equivalence translations in diverse languages, they were forced to grapple with the fact that each culture had its own way of relating to God and this eventually led to the widespread emphasis on contextual theology that is seen in the Christian world today.

Since the time of Christ, we have made much progress in recognizing the uniqueness and value of each culture and its language as well as the things we all have in common. But there is still much to be done. Linguists have yet to completely understand language and how it works in our brains. Because of this, we do not understand exactly how meaning is encoded in language. With this understanding, we might be able to devise a better way to translate. And there are still Christians in many cultures trying to find their own way of expressing their faith; and since cultures are continually changing, this process will never be completely finished. Progress made in each of these areas will continue to influence the other, and further investigation of the interaction between them will yield more knowledge than would be possible in studying them separately.

At first glance, it seems that the linguistic examination of translation would be unlikely to have any impact on religious studies, especially if one only takes the classical view of theology, but on closer examination, we see that they are intimately connected.
Translation studies and religious studies have both always required an interdisciplinary approach. This is true of religious studies because a person’s spiritual beliefs have the power to affect every area of their life, and when there is a large religious community it can have great influence over an entire society. It is true of translation studies because it involves literary studies and the study of language which requires linguistics, philosophy of language, psychology, communication theory, and semiotics. In order to understand a text and translate it into another language one must understand both cultures, so anthropology is added to the list. But this paper has explored the surprising but powerful way in which these two fields interact at the most basic level of our understanding of the world. A similar interdisciplinary approach to many fields could be very beneficial. While there is definitely value in specialization within academia and the focused, field-specific investigations performed by most scholars, profound insight can be gained by stepping back and looking at the broader implications one field has on another.
Endnotes

1 Original source was written in German, so this information was taken from Fawcett’s summary and discussion of the relevant sections.

2 “Nyarafolo is a language belonging to the Gur (Niger-Congo) language family and the Senufo sub-family. It is spoken by approximately 65,000 people, most of whom originate or reside in the Préfecture of Ferkessédougou in northern Côte d’Ivoire” (DeGraaf 1).

3 Here, the word ‘original’ refers to the fact that the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, and the Septuagint was a Greek translation of the Hebrew. Since the only extant Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament are much later copies of any of the actual first manuscripts written, this sentence does not imply that Jerome was in fact able to use these original manuscripts.

4 Cebaara is another Senufo language spoken in northern Côte d’Ivoire.
Appendix

Gbambalivogo

All translations by Christina Melick. Original text from an audio-recording of a story told by Moïse Nagnanigue Koné.

*Donc mi nε wάa Gbambalivogo mε*

So I HAB go Gbambalivogo to

*So, I often go to (the village of) Gbambalivogo*

nε Kulocalε seńre nyuu dè tεngεfoli mε bèle,

and God’s words talk about DET.G4 believer to DET.G1P,

*and talk about God’s word to the believers,*

tεngεfoli bāli biɛlɛ baà Gbambalivogo nε gɛ.

believer DET.PROX.G1P G1P.ID there Gbambalivogo in DET.G2S

*those believers who are there in Gbambalivogo.*

A cεngɛ kàa mi puu nε wάa koligɔ nε gɛ
day G2S.INDEF I NONP HAB go road on DET.G2S

*One day, I was going on the road*

à mi moto sɛnì fùrɛ.

when my moto AND get.tired
when my moto broke.

A mi kôligɔ nε kôligɔ nε kôligɔ fuo à mi fùrɛ.

So I push and push and push until when I get.tired

*Then I pushed and pushed until I got tired.*

A mi sɛnì jiin Gbambalivogo nε gɛ
Then I AND enter Gbambalivogo in DET.G2S

*Then I entered Gbambalivogo*

à mi sɛnì nε moto yérigε wɛ nε sɛnì liɛlɛ sieri bèle.
so I AND my moto stop DET.G1S and AND old.people greet DET.G1P

*so I stopped my moto and greeted the old people.*

Weli mε bèle,

us to DET.G1P

*At our place, (in Côte d’Ivoire)*
when you go visitor.place in DET.G2S you HAB people greet DET.G1P
when you are visiting somewhere you always greet the people.

So I greet the old men and greet the old women

and AND young.women and young men then I G1P all greet
and young women and young men, I greet all of them.

Then they give me a place to sit and I drink some water.

At that moment, then we sing and praise God’s name.

After this,

then I talk about God’s word to the believers,

We pray because a church has not yet been built in Gbambalivogo.

then I ask them for their prayer requests.
A pe jo aan, sien wi náarigè ken già.
If G1P say yes, person G1S request give DET.G2S
*If they say yes, that person gives the request.*

Weli nè Kulocèliè náari sien mè wè.
we HAB God pray person to DET.G1S
*We pray to God for the person.*

Donc pànga gà mi yé kë baà.
so today DET.G2S I ANT go there
*So today I had gone there.*

Mi nè waa jìnmc, ó jìnmc.
I HAB go Friday, every Friday
*I usually go there Friday, every Friday.*

Donc panga gà mi puu baà Gbambalivogo mè gà,
So today DET.G2S I be there Gbambalivogo at DET.G2S
*So today I was there at Gbambalivogo,*

à we Kulocèliè nàari kàsaa wuu nè, nèkicèn kàsaa wù nè pàan.
and we God pray rain concerning on because rain 3P.NEG.PAST RIPF come
*and we prayed to God concerning the rain, because the rain hasn’t come yet.*

Nè kòli nè Kulocèliè nàari bali mè pe nè yáa bèle
we turn to God pray DET.PROX.G1P for G1P HAB suffer DET.G1P
*We turn to pray to God for those who are sick*

nèkicèn yaalà yo baà mìénì.
because sick.people be there also
*because there are also sick people there.*

A welli Kulocèliè náari pe mìénì mè.
Then we God pray G1P all for
*Then we pray for all of them.*

A mi péli nè koli nè pèn.
Then I begin and turn and come
*Then I come back.*

Kirè gi mi baara dè Gbambalivogo mè.
G2S.EMPH G2S.ID my work DET.G4 Gbambalivogo at
*That’s it, my work at Gbambalivogo.*
Dynamic Equivalence Translation:

So, I often go to the village of Gbambalivogo and talk about God’s word to the believers there. One day, I was on my way there when my moto broke. So I pushed it – I pushed and pushed and pushed – until I was really tired. Then I arrived at Gbambalivogo so I stopped my moto and greeted the old people.

In Côte d’Ivoire, when you are visiting somewhere you always greet the people. So when I get to Gbambalivogo, I greet everyone: the old men, the old women, the young women, and the young men. Then, as polite hosts, they give me a place to sit and I drink some water.

Then we sing some worship songs. After the singing, I preach to the believers in Yejuweli’s house because a church has not yet been built in Gbambalivogo, although we are praying for one.

When I finish preaching, I ask them for prayer requests. Whoever has one shares the request, and then we pray for that person.

So today I had gone there. I usually go there every Friday. So today I was there at Gbambalivogo, and we prayed to God concerning the rain, because the rain hasn’t come yet. We also prayed for those who are sick there. Then we prayed for everyone. Then I came back. That’s it, what I do at Gbambalivogo.

Cultural Adaptation:

So, every week I go to the Huddle in Carter and lead a Bible study with some freshman girls who are Christians. One day, I was walking there from the Student Union when my flip flop broke. So I just walked the rest of the way there in my bare feet, and by the time I got there my feet really hurt. So I went in and signed in at the desk.

At UT, when you visit a friend in a different dorm, you have to sign in at the front desk. Once I’ve checked in I go into the Huddle and before we start the Bible study we all talk about the last week and catch up with each other. We have to meet in the Huddle because dorm rooms are too small for all of us to fit in.

Once everyone’s there, we read a passage from the Bible and then talk about what it means and how it applies to our lives. After that, I ask them for prayer requests, and then we pray for each other.

So I had gone there today, because it’s Wednesday, and we have Bible study every Wednesday. Today we prayed for all our tests, because, as college students, someone always has a big test they’re worried about. Then we prayed for a few girls who had a cold, and then we prayed for all the other prayer requests. After that, I left and came back to my apartment. That’s what I do for Wednesday night Bible studies in Carter!
Works Cited


van den Berg, Harold. “Cebaara name for God.” E-mail to the author. 10 November 2007.

Works Consulted


