

## The Semiotics of Christian Theological Translation and Interpreting

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### ABSTRACT

The Christian theological text, whether written or oral is a derivative of a sacred text called The Bible, thus, making the theological text a second order text. This makes it possible for the Christian theological text to adopt first of all, the semiotic forms of The Bible: signs, symbols, vestments and colours as well as those of the modern church. Semiotic translation which implies a decoding of signs and symbols, interprets textual signs and symbols in a source text (ST) to the target audience (TA). Hence, translation is an interpretative activity. The translation of Christian theological semiotics could be done in-text, in footnotes or in notes and references as a form of elucidation to the target audience. Theology is a discipline and as such, most of its signs and symbols are technical. To deal with its semiotics is part of the deverbalisation process which its translator must engage in, in order to understand the source text (ST) and to reverbalise the same. The paper aims at furnishing Christian theological translators with the meanings of selected Christian theological signs and symbols. This is a plunge into the dynamic equivalence of the signs and symbols, since formal equivalence, calque and loaning do not deliver the relevant comprehension needed by the translator for adequate reverbalisation of the source text. The paper highlights the importance of semiotic research in the translation of Christian theological texts.

### 1. Introduction

Christian theological texts of various forms, especially, those that talk about public worship, contain symbolic objects, elements and vestments. To translate them by loaning the terms such as: stole, scarf, wafer, cross, ark etc only fills space in the target text without creating meaning effect because such words are terminological, belonging to a discipline. On the other hand, some of such terms that have direct equivalents in the target language do also miss-out their meaning effects to the target audience. This loss of meaning effect occurs because the translator does not understand the significance of the theological sign or symbol, and therefore cannot incorporate it in his translation. The translator therefore makes the act of translating a word for word activity, rather than a process which begins by deverbalising the source text (ST), in order to arrive at adequate understanding of it, then progresses to re-expressing (reverbalsing) what he, the translator, understands. By meaning effect in this context, we mean the content of a translated Christian theological text that contains the "priestly stole", that can make its reader, coming into a mainline church service setting, to know that the service is a sacramental service of baptism, Eucharist or even a wedding ceremony, because the priest is wearing a stole or to know that the priest wearing the preaching scarf amidst those wearing stoles, is the preacher in the service. Does the cross in a theological text of the Christian faith mean the same thing as the Red Cross on the Red Cross Society Emblem or the Red Cross on a green background hanging on the road-side? These variations in meaning and meaning effect call for theological competence in translating the Christian theological text.

## **2. What is Semiotics**

Eco and Nergaard (2004, p.218) has this to say about semiotics:

Semiotics is generally understood to cover the study of all systems of signification and of the various processes of communication. General semiotics is concerned with some general features that characterize all systems of signification in spite of their obvious difference

This is the Saussurian concept of *signe* quoted in Vinay and Darbelnet (1958, p28), which states that speech is made up of *signes*(signs). These derive from vocabulary, grammar and intonation and gives to speech what is generally known as message, the essence of speech. This is termed structural semiotics, analysing signs independent of the communication process.

Eco and Nergaard (2004, p.221) go further to state:

Translation does not involve comparing a language (or any other semiotic system) with another language or semiotic system; it involves passing from a text "a" elaborated according to a semiotic system "A", into text "b", elaborated according to a semiotic system "B".

This makes us to agree that when a drawing of a human skull positioned at the intersecting point of a long letter "X", is re-expressed as "danger", translation has taken place. This is inter-semiotic translation. This conception situates within the triadic divisions of translation which includes intralingual translation or reconstruction, interlingual translation or translation proper and inter-semiotic translation or transmutation.

So far, it is evident that semiotics is the study of Ferdinand de Saussures's *signification*, which is the meaning of a sign (*signe*), in a given context (*signifié*), a referent, i.e. the semiosis of a given semiotic system (signs and symbols) and their interpretants.

Whereas signs as codes indicate (constituents of a given human language), symbol according to Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary Revised Edition (2006) means:

1. a thing that represents or stands for another, usually something concrete or material representing an idea or emotion, e.g. the colour red representing danger.
2. a letter or sign used to represent a quantity, idea, object, operation etc, such as the x used in mathematics to represent multiplication process or £ use for Pound sterling
2. 3. Psychal: an object or action which represents an unconscious or repressed conflict.

The above dictionary definitions would rightly make us to infer that to gnash one's teeth is a symbol because it is an action carried out to repress an emotional conflict; that a teacher standing in front of his or her pupils with a finger on his/her lips is a symbol, all pointing to the fact that a symbol is a non-linguistic representation of a reality.

### **2.1 Semiotics and Translation**

It has been established that semiotic *signification* in Saussurian terms is context driven. The context could be cultural, professional, socio-political, socio-economic or even religious. This goes to affirm, in other words, that semiotics/semiosis is a constraint. It has also been stated above, according to *Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary Revised Edition* (2006), that the colour "red" represents danger, but consider walking into a church decorated with red linens on the pulpit, the chancel, the lectern, the reading desks and the priest(s) dressed in red stole(s). Would this also mean "danger?" No! It would only signify a saint's day or Holy Week beginning with the Palm Sunday, according to *Church Book and Desk Diary* ( 2018: March 25-29, June 11).

The import of semiotics in translation is stated in Nida's (2007, p.161) discussions on "Principles of Correspondence" where it is stated that formal correspondence occurs at four levels of: words, grammar, text and pragmatics. What Nida emphasises at the pragmatic level of formal correspondence is the translation of implicatures as illustrated above with the colour red. Explaining implicature as a gricean principle, of H.P. Grice, Ndimiele (2007, p.141-2) writes:

The essence of implicature is to account for what the speaker can imply, suggest, or mean, as distinct from what he literally says; i.e. what is overtly expressed. So, the notion of implicature rests upon a distinction between what is explicitly said and what is implied (i.e. not overtly expressed).

To this effect Nida (2007, p.161) writes:

A consistent F-E translation will obviously contain much that is not readily intelligible to the average reader. One must therefore usually supplement such translations with marginal

notes, not only to explain some of the formal features which could not be adequately represented, but also to make intelligible some of the formal equivalents employed, for such expressions may have significance only in terms of the source language or culture.

This is an interplay of semiotics and pragmatics in the field of translation. Intelligibility in this case refers to a free flow of understanding of a translated/interpreted text, without supplementary investigations. To achieve this, Nida calls for "marginal notes."

### 3. Translation and Theology

This is the effort geared towards re-expressing or reformulating a text within the domain of theology. According to Fiorenza (1999, p.178), theology is a discipline which has: "*The task to engage in a critical delineation, reflection, and evaluation of the rhetoric of God or on how Scriptures, traditions and believers speak about their God*".

This view gives Christians and Christian theologians the impetus to talk about African theology, European theology, American theology, Roman Catholic theology, Protestant theology, Anglican theology, etc. Theology, it must be observed, has many branches such as liturgy, creedal theology, reformation theology, systematic theology, etc, but the chief and source of every Christian theology is biblical theology which itself is divided into the Old Testament theology and New Testament theology.

#### 3.1 A Theological Text is a Second Order Text

It is evident from the foregoing, that a theological text is a derivative of a sacred text such as *The Bible* of the Christian Faith. By this, it would be right to say that bible commentaries, Bible dictionaries, Christian literatures, The Book of Common Prayer, hymn books, sermons, Episcopal letters read on Youth Sundays, Mothering Sundays and all texts whether oral or written, which are analysis, interpretations, evaluations, even summaries of Scripture as in creedal theology, are theological texts. This makes the theological text a second order text. The sacred text, *The Bible* for example, is the first order text. This character of the theological text demands from the translator a proper knowledge of biblical exegesis which Ofuokaa (2007, p.81) sees as a study of the historical, geographical, religious and social backgrounds to a biblical text in its use of words and expressions. This enhances the translator's comprehension of his corpus. Where the author is in error, the translator can point it out to him.

#### 3.2 A Theological Text is Multidisciplinary in Nature

Theology borrows from various disciplines to generate a theological text. For example Ezuoke (2017, p.4) borrows the doctrine of *Non est factum* (Not my deed) from the field of Law to elucidate *Luke 23:34*: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do:"

These on the contrary, were sane adults who had earlier tried Him according to the requirement of the law and imputed guilt and condemnation on Him. So, cognitively they comprehended their action: that they were executing a man charged with treasonable felony (king of the Jews) to summarily stop him from posing threats to the Roman government. However, there was a domain of knowledge that was lacking in them, and that was spiritual: they did not know the spiritual implications of what they were doing. So, the spiritual connotation of the clause is that the Jews were: ignorant, bereft of understanding and foolish. Therefore, they should not be held liable for their action. The reality of foolishness, ignorance or to be bereft of understanding is that a person should not be taken seriously. He is like a lunatic, an infant; his deeds are "not his deeds". He is irresponsible in every inch of his action.

The multidisciplinary nature of theological texts poses problem for the theological translator because he must have to do supplementary readings in order to understand terms, ideas, concepts and doctrines in disciplines involved in his corpus. This will lead him into the search for adequate meaning –equivalents in the target language. This is a hermeneutical challenge.

#### 3.3 Functional Hybridity of the Theological Text

At the first-order level, *The Bible* in (2Tim. 3:16-17) exhibits a functional hybridity which must be sustained at the second-order level:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This means that the second-order text (theological text) inherits from the first order text (Scripture) a hybridity of functions as follows: didacticism and persuasion. In (2 Peter 1:20-21) *The Bible* adds a third function of Scripture which theological texts inherit that is the prophetic function:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Prophecy is a projection into the future, foretelling it. The hybrid functions of both biblical and theological texts invite the theological translator to acquaint himself with the linguistic forms of *The Bible* as expressed in five (5) speech acts of *The Bible*, which according to Dickson (2010, p.105) are as follows: (i) Imperatives – commands (ii) interrogatives – questions (iii) declaratives – stating the obvious (iv) exhortations – encouragements (v) optatives – prayers and wishes.

### **3.4 Textual Hybridity of the Theological Text**

A theological text could be operational or technical, prescribing functions and codes of conduct as in rubrics of liturgical texts of Eucharist, holy matrimony, matins etc. It also includes teaching manuals on the priestly and marriage codes as well as Christian life-style. It could at the same time be narrative: containing true-life accounts (testimonies), literary with figures of speech such as proverbs, idioms, metaphors, similes etc. A theological text can also be formal, containing forms as in hymns and anthems, having stanzas and meters. All these could be contained in one theological text.

## **4. Translation and Interpreting**

For the purpose of this unit of study, we choose to consider translation from viewpoint of the dynamic equivalence principle. According to Vanessa Loenardi (<http://en.wikipedi.org.org/Vanessa+Leonardi>):

Dynamic equivalence is defined as a translation principle according to which the translator seeks to translate the meaning of the original in such a way that the TL wordings will trigger the same impact on the TC audience as the original wording did upon the ST audience.

Bariki (2003, p.259) tells us that “translation is a discipline that enjoys interesting links with a wide variety of disciplines”, asserting that translation is a “communicative event”. These accounts for why Akakuru (2003, p.95) sees translation as: “a dynamic activity which call into play diverse but convergent competencies.” In the case of meaning-effect, Bariki (2003, p.561) states that speech act, which is a communicative and pragmatic index is classified into the illocutionary act (coherent sentence), the illocutionary force (the implicature of a coherent sentence) and the perlocutionary effect (anticipated response from the interlocutor). As a rule, a translated text must be so linguistically and pragmatically coherent that it will produce the same meaning in the target language (TL) and the same effect (psychological, pragmatic, sociological, and ideological) in the target audience (TA). Diverse but convergent competences refers to inter-disciplinary knowledge a translator must have in order to do an effective work: lexicography, communication, linguistics etc.

Schleiermacher (2007, p.43) views translation from the two forms of language: oral and written forms of language, whether intralingually or interlingually:

Yea, are we not often compelled to translate for ourselves the utterances of another who, though our compeer is of different opinion and sensibility? Compelled to translate, that is, wherever we feel that the same words upon our own lips would have a rather different import than upon or at least weigh here the more heavily, there the more lightly, and that, would we express just what we intended, we must needs employ quite differently words and turn of phrase; and when we examine this feeling more closely so that it takes on the character of thought, it would appear that we are translating.

This transportation of constituents of utterance in the same language, is intralingual translation, whether it is done to reduce or to strengthen the tenor or tone of speech and whether it is done to help comprehension, what is done is oral translation.

If these definitions appear arbitrary, interpretation being commonly understood to refer more to oral translation and translation proper to the written sort, may we be forgiven for choosing to use them thus out of conscience in the present instance, particularly as the two terms are not at all distant one from another.

Here, Scheleiermacher (2007, p.43) makes a terminological distinction; oral translation is what he calls interpretation and a written re-expression of statements is what he calls translation.

Simpson (2009, p.8) differentiates translation from interpreting with the following words:

And we know that the user of translation may run from the poor teenage who wants his/her certificate or diploma written in one language translated into another for the purposes of employment, or recognition as an equivalent towards admission, to the big commercial enterprise or international organization for whom the translation of the material from one language into another is the order of the day. As for the employers of interpreters... they are more often than not very "heavy" users like the big international organizations, important arms of government, big professional organizations...and of course commercial organizations.

Simpson goes further to say: "What we are trying to say is that the user of the interpreter's services is very rarely an individual. It is more likely than not a group, a large number of people, an assembly." The "heavy" user population implies *audition/auditeurs* (listening/listeners) and this is oral, for interpreting. The translation of a certificate or diploma from the language of its writing into another confirms that translation is a written re-expression of text. These make us to infer that Bible Translators such as: Wycliffe Bible Translators, Bible Society of Nigeria (BSN) etcetera, Bible Commentators, authors of Christian theological texts, preachers, teachers and expositors of *The Bible*, jointly and severally are involved in the translation and interpretation of biblical texts.

#### 4.1 The Theological Text as a Technical Text

To characterize the Christian theological text as a technical text, we choose to adopt the indices of a technical text as outlined by Peter Newmark in Ajunwa (2004, p.141) as follows:

Academic level: These are terms of Greek and Latin origins. They include: Communion (*Gr. koinônia*), eschatology (*Gr. eschata*), episcopacy (*Gr. episkopos*), orthodoxy (*Gr. orthodoxia*), gospel proclamation (*Gr. kerygma*) Sacrament (*Lat. Sacramentum*), Patriarch (*Lat. Patriarche*), ante communion (*Lat. Ante*), trisagion(*Gr*) liturgy (*Gr. leitourgia*), deacon (*Gr.diakonein*), Kyrie eleison (*Gr*), Soteriology (*Gr. Soteria*), Pneumatology (*Gr. Pneuma*), eucharist(*Gr. eucharistos*), theology (*Gr. theos*).

The next index of a technical text according to Newmark is how professionals in the field use their professional terms among themselves. The illustrative text below is an allocation of duties by the president of a Holy Communion service to officiating priests in the vestry:

We are going in now, for a Eucharistic service. Rev A, you take the ante-communion up to kyrie eleison. Do not forget that I will say the prayer of absolution. Rev B, you take the Kerygma and do not forget the eschatological import of the lectionary for today. The deacon will do the ablution at the end of the celebration.

The third index is how professionals communicate the technical words in their profession to non-members of their profession. The terms in italics are interpreted below:

- |    |                       |   |   |
|----|-----------------------|---|---|
| 1. | <i>Eucharistic</i>    | = | Having to do with Holy Communion                    |
| 2. | <i>Ante-communion</i> | = | Proceedings before communion proper                 |
| 3. | <i>Kyrie eleison</i>  | = | Prayer for God's mercy                              |
| 4. | <i>Absolution</i>     | = | The conclusion and summary of a confessional prayer |
| 5. | <i>Kerygma</i>        | = | Sermon  |
| 6. | <i>Eschatological</i> | = | Having to do with signs of the end of the age       |
| 7. | <i>Ablution</i>       | = | The cleansing of Holy Communion vessels.            |

#### 4.2 Symbols of Christian theology

The first ever recorded symbol in Christian theology dates back to Emperor Constantine and his victory against Marxentuis at the battle of Milan, East of Rom in, 312 AD. In this battle that would end Christian persecution and legalize Christianity as state religion, Emperor Constantine, sequel to a night vision he had in the night before the battle, defeated Marxentuis and his army with a shield of cross with signs of the Saviour's name (*Gr. X and P i.e.Ch and R*) cutting across the centre of the cross. Okoro (2011, p.53) records as follows:

This means the two first Greek letters for Christ were together run in the monograph and from this time onwards the sign of the cross was adopted by Christians everywhere in the empire as a symbol of their faith. It always stood, not only for the cross on which Christ died, but also for Christ himself.

Emeribe (2013, p.130-7) outlines the following symbols in Christian theology in (Nos 1-7) below. (Nos 8 & 9) are contained in *Book of Common Prayer* (2007, p.170). *Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary* (2006) discusses (No.10). Pew (No.11) is discussed in *Collins Canadian English Dictionary* (2004), whereas *The Bible* (No. 12) is found in *Wycliff Bible Dictionary* (2005).

S/N	Semiosis	Interpretant
1	The Cassock	Public worship
2	The Surplice	Purity
3	The hood	Academism/Scholarship
4	The stole	Yoke of Christ and bond servanthood to Him
5	The preaching scarf	Authority to preach the gospel
6	The clerical collar	Ownership and submission to the will of the supreme authority
7	The girdle	Readiness and preparedness for exploit
8	The communion wafer	The flesh of Christ
9	The communion wine	The blood of Christ
10	The pulpit	The clergy in general
11	The pew	Church congregation
12	<i>The Bible</i>	The divinely inspired record of God's revelation of Himself and of His will for mankind
13	The red colour	Saints' day of, the period between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday, martyrdom. Secular: danger or brothel
14	XP	Christ
15	Skull on elongated letter x	May be used to mean Golgotha (Place of skull). Secular: danger!
16	Cope	High church dignitary
17	Mitre	Head-dress of a Bishop
18	Pastoral staff	Chief minister's authority
19	White and gold vestments	Purity, joy and peace, also during solemnities like Easter, Christmas etc.
20	Green vestments and linens	Nature, fertility, fruitfulness and ordinary time of the year
21	Purple or violet vestments and linen	Humility, royalty, Lenten period and funeral service

**5. Conclusion**

The Christian theological text is a technical text, having some of its root words in Greek and Latin. These technical components of the theological text are not connotative in their use of signs, except in their use of symbols. The paper aims at furnishing Christian theological translators with some selected Christian theological signs and symbols. Our findings promote the use of interpretants of symbols above the use of calques and loan words. The study reveals that theological translation is a technical translation because theology has its own peculiar terms, signs and symbols. These terms, signs and symbols do not convey adequate meaning to non-professional theologians, unless with the use of interpretants. The paper, therefore, advocates the use of footnotes and dynamic equivalence, where necessary to interpret theological signs and symbols. These symbols therefore, call for interpretation to a non- theological audience whether as readers or as listeners, to remove all forms of ambiguity and lack of clarity. This is because when the audience of a text lose track of meaning with what they are hearing or reading, it becomes difficult for them to produce the required corresponding behaviour to the message of the text.

Our study is limited to the technical and professional nature of theological signs, symbols and the use of Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence strategies in translating Christian semiotic texts.

This work opens up doors of research into the Pragmatics of Theological Translation, the Etymology of Christian Theological Terms and the Hybridity of Christian Theological Texts.

**6. Recommendation**

Given the insufficiencies of *calque*, loaning and even term creation in making for meaning and meaning effects in translating and interpreting the semiosis (signs and symbols) of theological texts of the church, it is only needful that interpretants be added in-text in both oral and written forms of such texts or notes be added to such technical words and symbols.

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