

# Naps, Lasagna, and Kissing

## How Translation Really Works

by Julie R. Frady

If you have taken a foreign language class, at some point you had to “translate” vocabulary for a test. If so, you might understand translation to mean seeing the word “nap” in English and replacing it with the word “siesta” in Spanish. That is exactly what many people think: “translation” of a document is simply a matter of finding a good dictionary (or Strong’s Concordance) and switching out the words.

Knowing how translation *actually* works will help you understand why there are so many translations of the Bible, and why it’s okay that they don’t say exactly the same thing. It will also help you avoid seeing how an interlinear text<sup>1</sup> or Strong’s Concordance renders a word and mistakenly thinking that’s exactly and always what it means.

Translation is a complex process that requires more than a bilingual dictionary or knowing two languages. It involves things like training, natural talent, knowing methodology and grammar, understanding the culture, identifying context, and discerning tone. In translation, the *Target Language* (TL) is the language you translate *into*, while the *Source Language* (SL) is the language you translate from.

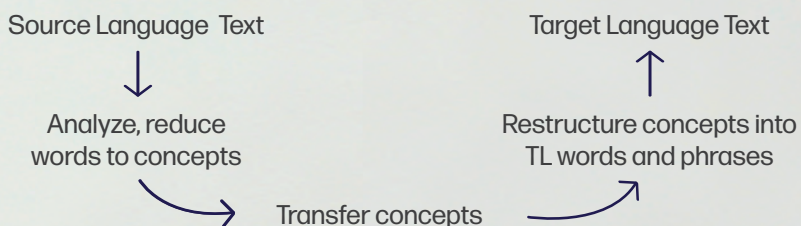
Why can’t we just “switch out words”? Because every language is interwoven with its culture; you can’t separate language from



Many people think translation works like this:

Source Language Text → Switch out words → Translated Text

But what a translator really does is illustrated by the following diagram, based on one created by Eugene Nida,<sup>2</sup> a respected biblical languages translator:



its culture any more than you could separate a hurricane from its wind. Culture affects how we perceive the world, so the world in which each language exists is actually a unique perspective on reality.

Words are like Tupperware® containers. Imagine three identical-looking containers full of lasagna. Container one's lasagna has cottage cheese and mushrooms, container two's lasagna is made with ricotta and spinach, and container three's lasagna has cottage cheese, spinach, and ground chicken. All of these containers look the same and all contain lasagna, but the *flavor* of these lasagnas will be different because they have differing ingredients.

The same is true of languages. Words are containers which hold meaning, and the contents will differ from language to language.<sup>3</sup> For example, if we look up the word “nap” in a Spanish/English dictionary, we’ll find “siesta” as its definition or “equivalent.” However, a siesta is not really a nap. In the United States, we can take a short sleep anywhere, any time of the day and call it a “nap.” In Spain, a “siesta” specifically refers to resting or quiet activity at home during the afternoon, which may not involve sleep at all. The containers “nap” and “siesta” both hold lasagna, but they don’t taste the same.

### What does this mean for Bible translation?

“Nap” and “siesta” are just single words (not entire paragraphs) from languages that exist in the same historical era. The books of the Bible, on the other hand, were written in ancient languages with metaphors, idioms, and cultural references foreign to speakers of modern languages like English (as my expertise is in Spanish and English, I will be focusing on these). Some of the original ingredients (meanings, connotations) of a Greek or Hebrew word are often not found in its English “equivalent,” and that modern language word often adds new ingredients that were

not in the original recipe. No translation can be 100 percent identical to the original SL text. As we take a concept from one culture and context to another, inevitably, something will be lost and something else will be added. The Jewish poet Hayim Nahman Bialik is often credited as saying that reading the Bible in translation is like kissing through a veil, with the implication being that we are not able to fully connect with our beloved.

### Does this mean we can't trust Bible translations?

That said, the accuracy of most of the commonly used major English Bible translations is very high. Even secular academia recognizes the overall quality and accuracy of biblical translation. In a graduate level course at a state university, we learned that Bible translation played a key role in the development of translation methodology, and that historically, the Bible translation processes have often been of very high quality. Our text attributed this accuracy to the fact that “in an age when the choice of a pronoun could mean the difference between life or condemnation to death as a heretic, precision was of central importance.”<sup>4</sup> Since some of these translators were condemned simply for daring to put Scripture into the everyday language of the people,<sup>5</sup> I believe that Bible translations were often of such high quality because translators were motivated by their respect for Scripture and fear of God, not by fear of human authorities.<sup>6</sup> The Holy Spirit also played a significant role. Our Bibles are not perfect, but they are accurate. Envision a bullseye for target practice. No translation will have fifteen holes in the center (perfection). Rather, a good translation will have fifteen holes clustered near the center (accuracy).

There is no simple answer to which modern Bible translation is the “most accurate.” Though some translations are better than others, “most accurate” depends on how you define “accurate.” Does it mean

“more literal” or “better at communicating meaning”? Does it use gender-inclusive language where the original languages do? Does it have easier vocabulary or is it something geared toward academic study? How you answer these questions determines whether you gravitate toward “formal” or “dynamic” translations. What do those terms even mean?

In spite of what you may have heard, a true “word-for-word” or “literal” translation of the Bible does not exist. Words rarely have 100 percent correlations of meaning between languages, as we saw with *nap/siesta* and our containers of *lasagna*. Even an interlinear gloss—which is as close to a word-for-word translation as we can get because it has dictionary definitions in English written below the SL text—is not exact in meaning. Furthermore, since different languages also use different sentence structures, an actual word-for-word translation would be unreadable, as this word-for-word rendering of Mark 4:1 illustrates: “And again he began to teach by the sea and was assembled to him crowd a very large, so as him in a ship having entered to sit in the sea, and all the crowd toward the sea on the land were.”

All languages have *form* (grammatical structure, vocabulary, etc.) and *dynamism* (meaning). Since no language can exactly replicate both the structure and meaning of another language, translators must choose to prioritize or even sacrifice parts of the form or meaning of a SL text to make the translation readable in the TL.

Some Bible translations that are described as “word-for-word” or “literal” are actually *formal* or *formally equivalent* translations. They try to preserve as much of the SL’s form (like vocabulary and sentence structure) as possible, at the cost of some of the meaning. This approach makes it easier to do word studies<sup>7</sup> and can

reveal important details or trains of thought that the original authors intended. Most seminaries and universities require students to use a formal translation in their coursework. However, formal Bible translations don’t sound very “natural” in English, and they are more difficult to read, requiring readers to put more effort into understanding the text. Older English Bible translations are typically formal, and these have the additional hurdle of archaic language.<sup>8</sup> The New American Standard Bible (NASB) is an example of a formal translation.

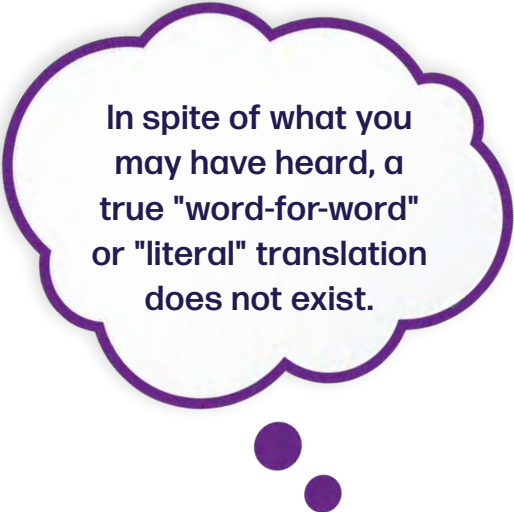
*Dynamic* or *functionally equivalent* translations prioritize transmitting meaning into the target language (TL) without focusing on the sentence structure or vocabulary choices of the Hebrew and Greek authors. They sound “natural” in English and are easy to read and understand. However, it’s difficult to do word studies and academic work with them, and translators’ interpretations and/or biases are more pronounced.<sup>9</sup> The New Living Translation (NLT) is an example of a dynamic translation.

Some translations are *blends*. They balance following the form or structure of the SL with communicating meaning, and they vary widely in where they fall on the formal vs. dynamic spectrum. While the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is a blend, it leans so far toward the formal side that many seminaries and universities accept its use. The Common English Bible (CEB) is also a blend, but leans toward the dynamic side. The New International Version (NIV) (2011) is in the middle of the spectrum.<sup>10</sup> Blends provide a good middle ground, taking the best of the formal and dynamic approaches while avoiding many of their worst characteristics. Blends usually have a US middle school<sup>11</sup> reading level, though ease of understanding and adherence to form can vary widely even within a single translation.

Paraphrases are an informal re-wording of the text and should not be confused with translations. While paraphrases like *The Message* and *The Living Bible* can be useful during personal devotions, they should not be your main Bible, nor used to figure out hard-to-understand or controversial passages. They are usually done by one person—not a group of translators—and do not follow all the criteria that translations use.

### Putting It All Together

Now, let’s use the Spanish phrase *¿Cómo te llamas?* to illustrate these differences between formal, dynamic, and blended translations. Pay attention to how each Bible translation might handle choices of vocabulary vs. easily communicating meaning. What are potential problems



**In spite of what you  
may have heard, a  
true “word-for-word”  
or “literal” translation  
does not exist.**

| Methodology                  | Sentence                                                        | (Hypothetical) Bible Translation         |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Original (or SL)             | ¿Cómo te llamas?                                                |                                          |
| Gloss                        | How yourself call [you]                                         | Interlinear text                         |
| Formal (w/ archaic language) | How dost thou call thyself?                                     | KJV (King James Version)                 |
| Formal                       | How do you call yourself?                                       | NASB (New American Standard)             |
| Blended (leaning formal)     | What do you call yourself?                                      | NRSV (New Revised Standard)              |
| Blended (middle ground)      | What name do you go by?                                         | NIV (New International Version)          |
| Blended (leaning dynamic)    | What is your name?                                              | CEB (Common English Bible)               |
| Dynamic                      | What's your name?                                               | NLT (New Living Translation)             |
| Paraphrase                   | Yo! What's yo' name, Bro? or<br>What's your handle, Good Buddy? | The Message<br>The Living Bible (1970's) |

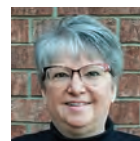
with being “too literal”? Could a word study of the verb “call” send us off in a direction the original text never intended? What might be lost by being too dynamic?

As we learned from looking at naps and lasagna, no translation can be perfect. So, don't restrict yourself to just one! It's important to use a good blend, along with a good formal, and a good dynamic translation, being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each. In this way, you can get closer to what the original languages meant to convey. Reading the Bible in translation may be like kissing through a veil, but using multiple translations thins that veil. And though kissing our beloved through a veil is not as nice as kissing without one, we are still getting to kiss!

## Notes

1. An interlinear text inserts words in English (or some other language) between the lines of a text's original language. For example, an interlinear of the New Testament book of Mark would have Mark's original Greek text with English definitions above or below each of the Greek words.
2. Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (London and New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd. and Routledge. First edition, 1980. Revised edition, 1991), 16.
3. Even within the same language the contents (meanings of a word) can change over time.
4. Bassnett, 49.
5. “Archbishop Thomas Arundel's Constitutions against the Lollards.” n.d. [www.bible-researcher.com](http://www.bible-researcher.com). <https://www.bible-researcher.com/arundel.html>.

6. John Foxe, John Milner, Ingram Cobbin, and The Library of Congress. 1856. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: A Complete and Authentic Account of the Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Primitive and Protestant Martyrs in All Parts of the World, with notes, Comments, and Illustrations. Internet Archive*. London: Knight and Son. 288. <https://archive.org/details/foxesbookofmarty00fo/page/n9/mode/2up>.
7. A “word study” is closely examining a specific word in a given passage, especially (though not always) looking at the various meanings and connotations of the original Hebrew or Greek word it was translated from, as well as considering context, and other places in Scripture that particular Hebrew or Greek word is used. The goal is to better understand the thought processes behind the author's choice of that word in the passage in question.
8. For example, the KJV's use of “peculiar” people in 1 Peter 2:9 means a “special possession,” not “odd” or “strange.”
9. If translators have patriarchal beliefs, their dynamic translations will more readily reveal that bias. The NLT renders 1 Tim. 3:2 with “so a church leader must be a man” although the Greek uses gender-neutral terms. And though many scholars recognize that *kephale* does not mean “authority,” dynamic translations such as *The Good News Translation*, *God's Word*, *EasyEnglish Bible*, and *Names of God Bible* render it as “authority” or “supreme over” rather than “head” in passages such as 1 Cor. 11:3.
10. I use the NIV for casual study, the CEB to teach and preach, and the NRSV for academic study. These all generally also use gender-inclusive terms where the original languages do.
11. Generally ages 11 to 14 years old.



**Julie R. Frady** is a deacon and minister of adult education and discipleship at her Free Methodist church in Kansas. She plays an electronic wind instrument in the praise band. Julie has an MA in Spanish and is an experienced translator and interpreter. She has also studied Koine Greek.