"All things to all people". On Nida and involvement

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Abstract. The work of Eugene Nida has been criticized on many grounds. Here we engage with criticisms from three authors: Y. C. Whang argues that dynamic equivalence cannot be based on the responses of any original readers, since that data is not available; translators thus would not translate in that way. Henri Meschonnic, on the other hand, accuses Nida of operating in too binary a way, of dividing options into just two alternatives that do not describe the complexity of sacred texts, and of reducing translation to the methods of marketing. From another angle, Lawrence Venuti decries dynamic equivalence as a recipe for illusory fluency, and ideologically laments Nida's humanist essentialism and missionary calling. In analyzing these three broad criticisms, we attempt to indicate the underlying complexity of Nida's work, and the extent to which he allows for multiple translations of Biblical texts, based on the multiple subjectivities of the missionary. From this functional plurality one might seek the ethical value of involvement in discourse, and thus make a case for Nida's work as a progressive step towards democratization.

Two introductory questions

I once took the liberty of asking Dr. Nida a double-banger multi-barbed question, at a conference in Prague, if I remember correctly. It went something like this: "Is not your preference for dynamic over formal equivalence a reductive simplification? And is your translation project not ultimately imperialist?". I thought the two questions might be connected, since the dynamic mode of translation makes everything sound natural and should thus hide that fact that, in the process of Christianization, a foreign culture is being imposed. Good questions, I thought. Let's see him get out of that!

The first question received a good answer: the two types of equivalence stand as poles for a range of options, and there are sometimes good reasons for preferring the more formal kinds of equivalence. There then followed several anecdotes about the need to understand the original texts, the greatness of scholarship, and an impassioned defense of good Greek, from a scholar of good Greek. It was a wonderful reply, and it went on for so long, with so many embedded stories, illustrations and asides, that when the orator finally asked, "Does that answer your question?", I refrained from insisting on the imperialist part. He got out of it, through sheer eloquence. Or I let him get out of it, out of respect for sheer eloquence.

The question of imperialist translation should nevertheless be addressed, and here I would like to start doing that. I will do this by taking seriously Nida's answer to the first question – there are many different ways of translating, and they may all have their time and place. What might that fundamental plurality mean for the ways in which cultures are imposed?

Three critiques of Nida

It's not just me. Some of the great translation theorists have had a go at Nida, as have many of the not-so-great. Almost always, the attack is on the ideal of dynamic

equivalence, as if Nida had said that there was only one legitimate way to translate. Nida did not just say that – there were always two polarities, and thus a small theater of options within which decisions had to be made. In historical context, however, Nida and his co-authors were of necessity arguing against the ideal of fidelity to the word (formal equivalence) and in favor of an evangelical transmission of spirit (the faith that would underlie dynamic equivalence). In historical context, the innovation was indeed to legitimize what others would see as adaptation, and what is nowadays sometimes called localization. Nida's insistence on that innovation varies, as well, from book to book, depending on whom he is trying to convince. However, to criticize him for having only ever defended dynamic equivalence seems short-sighted, and even a little unfair. His *theoretical* contribution was to open a conceptual space within which a range of translation options could be debated. That contribution should perhaps be defended against the narrow critiques.

Let us now briefly review three such critiques, to see how Nida might reply. The first is a generalist set of complaints, from a translator familiar with religious texts. The second is the assault in Nida launched by the French theorist and translator Henri Meschonnic, who would declare fidelity to the rhythms of the Hebrew alliance. The third is the dismissal of Nida by the American theorist and translator Lawrence Venuti, who opposes evangelism outright. In all three cases, we will invent replies for Nida, since we do not have his at hand. In all three cases, we are looking for one simple answer to many complex problems. Our replies will get us there, little by little.

A Korean translator

In a volume on Bible translation, the Korean translator Y. C. Whang reviews Nida's theories and formulates no fewer than six arguments against dynamic equivalence. The arguments are the typical fare of translation debates. Here they give us occasion to dispense with more than a few dead-end discussions. We present each of Whang's objections, then some possible responses, which might be read as a distanced defense of Nida.

1. *Reader response is unavailable.*

   If the aim of translation is to induce a response from the receptors of the second language which is identical to that of the receptors of the first language, how can a translator confirm whether the response of the former [...] is identical to that of the latter? (Whang 2004: 52)

Possible answer: You cannot, except on very general levels such as "confirmation of faith" "conversion", "illumination", "inclusion in the canon" or "they liked it". In advertising, the bottom line is whether or not the product is bought, and there are many ways of building a brand to attain that end. Something like that is at work here. There is no pressing need for the response to every single sentence to be the same, quite apart from there being no empirical way to ascertain identity.

Second possible answer: Every act of reading is in part an interpretation of the way an implied reader is supposed to respond, and that implied reader is really what is at stake here. The implied reader may minimally be seen as the set of reading options for which the text would be entirely non-contradictory (we leave the rest of the theory for another

place). Translators, like any readers, are involved in negotiating that ideal whether they like it or not.

2. *Dialogues are unavailable.*

> To achieve functional equivalence, a translator must first imagine the dialogue between the *Vorlage* [the text to be translated] and the original receptors, and should then try to find the translation which will best build the functionally identical dialogue between the translation and the present receptors. Now, how can a translator identify the dialogue between the *Vorlage* and the numerous readers? That is practically impossible. (Whang 2004: 52)

On the surface, this objection would seem to be the same as the first, and merits the same responses. We note, however, Whang's significant shift from "response" to "dialogue", which actually functions as a transition from behaviorism (stimulus-response) to hermeneutics (texts as being open to continuous productive interpretation). That hermeneutic tradition might also account for the term *Vorlage*, even though it has little traditional right to be here (a *Vorlage* in hermeneutics is more usually an unknown precedent text, but still). This allows us one further response:

Possible answer: Dialogues do not finish, whereas behaviorist interactions tend to be presented as finite. Who is to say that that the dialogue is not between humanity and the text, and the translation is not just one further act in that ongoing flux?

3. *Where is meaning?*

> […] if the burden of translation is moved from the author's meaning to the receptor's response, where does the translator search for the meaning of the text? (Whang 2004: 53)

Easy answer: In the text. If the text can be seen in terms of dialogic exchange, then there is little ground for a radical separation of author from reader. The author's meaning is constructed as an attempt to gain a certain response, and the reader's response might be seen as an attempt to respond to the author's attempt. The to-and-fro movements still work no matter how many implied, ideal or historical reading positions you then want to fit in. So why should we be choosing between author and receptor (not a happy term), one *or* the other?

4. *The task is too hard.*

Here Whang picks up a text where De Waard and Nida summarize the difficulties of rendering Biblical texts in a dynamic way: extreme distance between the source and the present day, impossibility of consulting the authors, and the limited extent of biblical corpora "so it is difficult to test for most stylistic patterns" (De Waard & Nida 1986: 186). Whang retorts that if dynamic equivalence is so hard, "it would have been sufficient for them to point out the problem of too literal translation, and show ways of dealing with that problem" (Whang 2004: 54).

Answer: Well, they do in fact point out the problems of literal translation, and they do present a set of strategies for overcoming those problems—that is precisely what the

practice of dynamic equivalence boils down to, despite the misleading references to "equivalent effect". Once again, the argument seems to assume a radical black-and-white division that is not always in evidence. As for the relative difficulties, if you look at it from a distance, the whole Bible translation project is crazy: these people want to take the stories from first-century Middle Eastern cultures (or much older and wider, for the texts in Hebrew) and make them work in the jungles of the world. But difficulty has never been an argument against faith.

5. *There is no possible comparison.*

> Even though Nida and Taber declare the comparison of responses of receptors then and now as the new and better approach to translation, it is not possible to find the concrete method of comparison in their books. (Whang 2004: 54)

This seems to repeat arguments 1 and 2 above, and so deserves the same responses once again. The new observation, though, is intriguing. As far as I am aware, there are indeed no actual comparisons of responses, even though all of Nida's work is replete with the most varied examples. Why should this be so?

All the philological work done on Biblical texts can nowadays say quite a lot about possible reader response. We can form some general ideas about the play of marked against unmarked text, about limited intertextuality, about new versus old information. All this finds its way into a series of handbooks for scholars; it is technical, linguistic stuff. But no one would really claim that the philological information is a "reader response" in itself. What actually happens, I suggest, is that the philological and theological scholarship forms a set of responses authorized within the contemporary institutions of Bible translation, and that those are the reading positions implicitly contrasted with those of potential new readers. The contrast is thus not at all between first-century Middle Eastern believers and the converts of two thousand years later, but between the small army of authorized "translation consultants" and the rather bigger armies of target-language native translators. The translations these days are done by the latter, with the guidance of the former. That is where the historical dialogue takes place. That is where the problematic comparisons are made and negotiated. And that, unfortunately, is the in-house scene of debate about which remarkably little evidence is divulged to public scrutiny.

Answer: The collaborative translation process is itself the scene of comparison and dialogue, in the present and not across the centuries.

6. *Dynamic equivalence is not what translators do.*

> I put myself psychologically in the position of authors, not readers. Translators unconsciously identify themselves as a mouthpiece of authors. (Whang 2004: 54)

Here the critic misses most of the above point. He makes the assumption, as do many, that translation is a one-on-one affair, with the lone translator at night, scouring the text for traces of the author. There is thus a universal "unconscious identification", apparently. Bible translation projects, however, are often not handled that way; few Bible translators would identify themselves with an ostensibly divine authorship; there is thus no reason why the apparent universal should concern the kinds of task Nida was writing about.

Answer: When the target-language speakers are made the translators, they are physically and cultural closer to future readers, and are thus more likely to identify on that side.

So much for Whang. Our general point would be that the kind of one-on-one scene informing his critique simply does not apply to most Bible translation projects. In order to understand Nida, we have to place his ideals, comparisons, dialogues and negotiations in a rather special frame of interaction.

A French poet

Henri Meschonnic is a little more sophisticated. He knows Nida is for the Bible, and that is the ground upon which he decides to meet him. Meschonnic's main argument, through a series of registers, it that Nida operates in terms of misleading binary oppositions:

> The point is to show that Nida's theory is not scientific, that it is a travesty of the transformational grammar that it uses, that it proceeds from an ideological distortion of the Bible, that it is made to provide surety for all ideological distortions, that it is nothing more than the fine-tuning, with modern instruments, of the oldest ideology of translation. One has to dialectize the elements that, in Nida, form a sterile opposition. (Meschonnic 1973: 329; our translation, here and throughout)

Strong stuff. Most of what Meschonnic has to say, in his dismissive lapidary style, is actually quite correct. That is why I once took the trouble to translate the critique and to have it published (as Meschonnic 2003), to bring the debate into the English language. Note, however, that the way Meschonnic undoes the binary oppositions is basically to pit Nida against Nida. Science vs. ideology? Yes, the aspiration to science is certainly part of Nida's project (one of his main books is called *Toward a Science of Translating*), but the project itself scarcely conceals the guiding role of Christian ideology, and the test of a translation is not in science but in actual use. Nida himself says "translation is much more than a science", and Meschonnic cites the phrase to prove the point (1973: 329). As Meschonnic observes, "*[e]mpiricism* is finally the territory, without outlet to science, wherein this 'theory' is developed, where it organizes translation committees" (1973: 347). A science of the text will ultimately not tell us how to translate; the users of the translations will; "this is something like market research", says Nida (1969: 163), whom Meschonnic cites in horror. But the science itself is not a facile opponent of ideology. As Whang noted, the actual application of any scientific method (the statistical calculation of "natural" syntactic structures, or the actual application of kernel-level transformationalism) goes no further than the odd idea or possibility in Nida. The appeal to science is there, but the practice is doing other things.

The more essential opposition attacked by Meschonnic is the one that pits form against content, formal equivalence against dynamic equivalence. In that, the attack is on the whole tradition of the Saussurean sign (signifier against signifier), which involves rather more than Nida. The critique is nevertheless of interest: "In Nida, the explicit point of departure is always the King James Version", says Meschonnic, which is why the form is always that which is difficult to understand. True enough, in a way. In Nida's theoretical texts there is not a lot of Greek, and very rarely any reference to the Hebrew (which is what most interests Meschonnic). The actual translating, in the

examples, appears to be from King James English into Nida English, from difficult Bible to explained Bible. Why should that be so? Surely those movements within English are not what translation is all about? Then again, these are movements within the scene of the consultant and the translation committee, which we have argued is the real place in which the translations take shape.

Meschonnic has a field-day with this restriction to two kinds of English:

> The notion of *response* is directed at the target language. It would prefer, in seeking the *natural*, a version that translated "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:6)—the source text is in English!—as "give one another a hearty handshake all around" (Nida 1964: 160). This translation, more intralinguistic than interlinguistic, has a logic that would eclipse all historical distance and require one to translate Shakespeare into contemporary English and Rabelais into contemporary French. If such attempts have been made, they have not won the day. Such is the force of the text over a theorization insufficient in its pragmatism. A text is a point of departure, not a point of arrival. (1973: 337-338)

A text is not a point of arrival. That simple assertion would contradict not only Nida's interest in reader-response, but also the whole tradition of *Skopostheorie*, and indeed much of Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies. A text is not a point of arrival? Meschonnic's position only makes sense if you think of his take on textuality, a quality of the great texts that travel across time and space, entering into continuous processes of interpretation and re-interpretation, retaining the quality that Derrida called "iterability". Nida's text, on the other hand, is indeed a point of arrival for the translation process. Of course, translations of biblical texts may gain iterability, becoming part of a language and culture, as has happened to the King James (which should explain why the apparent difficulty accompanies familiarity and the sacred rhythms so much of interest to Meschonnic). And it is true that Nida is not particularly interested in that. Understanding is the only key he seeks, or so it would seem. To that extent, Meschonnic's critique would seem to be quite justified.

Why these apparent limitations in Nida? Why the contradictory references to science? Why the unexplained use of examples all in English? Why the ostensible insensitivity to rhetoric, to literary values, to the endurance of great texts across centuries?

The simple answer, I propose, is that Nida's texts on translation were never meant for a reader like Henri Meschonnic. They were arguments and guidelines designed for translators and translation consultants, to people familiar with the King James, familiar with source-based strategies, and in search of some open principles that could orient collective translation projects. The simple binarisms are pedagogical and rhetorical tools, and perhaps little else. And the appeal to science, in that context, functions more as an appeal to non-individualism, or indeed to non-sectarianism, to something beyond the sensitivities and preferences of the lone translator. Only from that perspective, read as a profoundly situated ideological project, can one make sense of what Nida puts in and the great deal he leaves out.

An American ideologue

Lawrence Venuti (1995: 21-23) helps clear a space for himself in the field of American Translation Studies by similarly reducing Nida to the ideal of dynamic equivalence.

Nida's position is then glossed as an "identification" with the target, and thus with a willful eclipse of cultural alterity. Nida's ideal would be the "fluency" that Venuti opposes and which he, Venuti, considers typical of hegemonic Anglo-American culture. Nida, in other words, is as bad as an American translation theorist can get.

Venuti side-steps a few minor problems here. For example, fluency is supposed to be typical of translations moving *into* English, and yet Nida's main concern is obviously translation into a multitude of major and minor languages-other-than-English. So how can fluency typify that directionality as well? Further, the ideal of dynamic equivalence would seek to preserve what is most natural in a wide range of target languages and cultures, and should thus surely work in favor of cultural difference, not against it. How does Venuti get around this? Nida, says Venuti, "is in fact imposing the English-language valorization of transparent discourse on every foreign culture" (1995: 21). Aha! True enough. Then again, Venuti could equally be imposing his own ideal of "foreignization". Surely the problem is not just the imposition, but also the value of what is being proposed?

Venuti has another go:

> Communication here is initiated and controlled by the target-language culture, it is in fact an interested interpretation, and therefore it seems less an exchange of information than an appropriation of a foreign text for domestic purposes. Nida's theory of translation as communication does not adequately take into account the ethnocentric violence that is inherent in every translation process - but especially in one governed by dynamic equivalence. (1995: 22)

I cite this passage in the hope that someone will someday explain it to me. What is the source culture here? What is the target? Whose domestic purposes? Does Venuti want dialogue with first-century Palestine? The very difficulty of answering such questions should indicate that Nida's project is far more complicated than Venuti's own binary oppositions. Does Nida fail to classify translation as violence? Of course he does, since he is in the business of spreading Christianity, which he would obviously not want to see as violence. Does he promote an interested interpretation of biblical texts? Of course he does, at least to the extent that his goal is evangelical. The long and the short of it is that Venuti criticizes Nida for wanting to spread a doctrine. That is rather like criticizing an architect for wanting to design houses. Nida is what he is, although there might be some good in the mix as well:

> Nida's advocacy of domesticating translation is explicitly grounded on a transcendental concept of humanity as an essence that remains unchanged over time and space. [...] Nida's humanism may appear to be democratic in its appeal to 'that which unites mankind,' but this is contradicted by the more exclusionary values that inform his theory of translation, specifically Christian evangelism and cultural elitism. (Venuti 1995: 22)

This is a key passage. What is at issue is not really Nida's supposed "cultural elitism", for which Venuti presents not a shred of evidence (elitism is more a problem of Venuti's own position). Nor can it be Christian evangelism as such, since that has to be accepted as a given, and it won't go away because of a bit of translation theory. The problem is rather the essentialist humanism upon which Nida's belief in translatability rests. For Venuti's postmodern milieu, all essentialism is illusory, a mask covering the

violence of cultural exchanges. For Nida, it is the secular underpinning of his entire profession.

If debate on this point is to be continued in any half-intelligent way, the question of a human essence must somehow be put in parentheses. The real question should be how the presupposition of essence underlies political beliefs like universal suffrage and multilingual governance. Whether right or wrong, the belief itself is necessary for substantial democracy, as a complex of values that perhaps Venuti and Nida would both want to impose on the world. We cannot try to convince the evangelists that their business is pure violence, not any more than we could convince the committed Marxists that their equally violent cause has been lost. If Bible translators are going to reply to Venuti, it should surely be in terms of the way their projects save communities, standardize languages, spread literacy, bring isolated social structures into wider communication networks, and promote policies that favor cultural diversity. Those arguments can all be made, and Nida-inspired translation projects can be shown to work towards all those noble ends. Such is the debate that should be taken to Venuti's door.

To simply dismiss the issue as violence, essentialism and elitism is unhelpful, to say the least.

All things to all people

So Nida is guilty of proselytizing, and the rest of his theories will therefore be guilty too. Interestingly, Venuti cites two passages from Nida's earlier texts, both of which are supposed to reveal the Bible translator's true colors. Both are worth reproducing here:

> The task of the true translator is one of identification. As a Christian servant he must identify with Christ; as a translator he must identify himself with the Word; as a missionary he must identify himself with the people. (Nida 1952: 117)

> A close examination of successful missionary work inevitably reveals the correspondingly effective manner in which the missionaries were able to identify themselves with the people – 'to be all things to all men' – and to communicate their message in terms which have meaning for the lives of the people. (Nida 1954/1975: 250)

It seems to me that Venuti is talking about translators (the passages are cited in his book *The Translator's Visibility*), whereas Nida is talking about much more. His translator is also a missionary, "a Christian servant", a multiple personality. One is reminded of the famous passage where Luther claims to be all the things that his critics were ("Are they doctors? So am I!", and so on, in his *Sendbrief*). Nida, however, is not particularly opposing or imitating or duplicating any other social function. The multiplicity resides deep with in the role of the missionary itself – the scholar in the jungle. It might help explain some of the features we have picked up from Nida's critics, particularly the difficulty of becoming the reader of his theorization, and his failure to deliver on some of the technical promises. What is remarkable is that there is still a reasonably coherent and identifiable voice behind all the multiple functions.

The phrase "all things to all men" (an unfortunately non-inclusive translation) is cited by Nida (and then by Venuti) from 1 Corinthians 9. It is from the King James translation, and has become a familiar part of the English language, used by many who remain unaware of its evangelical provenance. It is worth several second looks:

What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel. For though I am free from all people, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

To convey the message, the mediator becomes like the receiver, as far as possible. Nida, like Paul, would have not just his own message, but his own presentation of self, adapted to that of the other. It is a problematic statement of principle. The self becomes duplicitous – technically "multiplicitous", but the moral fault remains duplicity. If a virtue for missionaries, it remains quite ambiguous in terms of general ethics.

We would say, in defense of Nida, that the binary simplifications, the strategic omissions, the naïve appeals to science, the apparent contradictions, and the rest, are all the result of strategic identifications. Here is Nida the teacher; here Nida the missionary; here the Greek scholar; here the sociolinguist; here the translation theorist, and in each case we have the discourse that corresponds to the purpose. Such would be the application of dynamic equivalence to the theorist himself. To each particular reader, the form that corresponds. And the criticisms therefore arise when particular readers wander into texts that were not designed for them.

Far better, I propose, for the self to remain the self, one thing for one person, as far as possible, and to let others do the work of interpretation. But we are not really here to argue the ethics of selfhood. There is an easier argument to be made.

Involvement

Happily, there is no need to stop at the self. We are dealing with texts, after all, and specifically with the use of translations in religious settings. Perhaps the phrase "all things to all people" need not concern a chameleon intermediary. Why should it not just refer to texts, and to a kind of textuality rather different from that which literary scholars tend to praise?

What happens if we accept that the receivers of a translated text, no matter who or what the intermediary, are free to do many different things with that text? In the case of Bible translation, it should be clear that some versions are for reading in church, others for private lay study, others for children, others for audiovisual presentation, and still others for philologists. Some will be very spoken, others very written. Even within the one situation several translations are possible. Consider the fire-brand preacher, thumping the King James as a book, reading out the archaisms precisely so the congregation will not understand, precisely in order to shift attention and trust to the preacher's own explanations and illustrations, so many further translations. In such situations, the act of reception is profoundly plural. It is the text itself that is made to be "all things to all people". And the principle of dynamic equivalence, in recognizing the plurality of different reception situations, may help provide and justify that plurality.

A text is not a point of arrival, says Meschonnic. But it may be one of many such points, and translational textuality may consist in precisely that plurality.

The kind of communicative virtue appropriate to this view should not be confused with "understanding" (are we ever sure we have reached any full

understanding?), nor "fidelity" (to whom?, to what?, if not our own understanding), nor even "appropriateness to purpose" (as if there were only one purpose at stake, as if a short-term goal could put an end to ongoing communicative exchanges). The virtue that most interests us here is what a certain mode of conversation analysis has chosen to call "involvement".

The basic idea comes from the sociolinguist Gumperz: "Once involved in a conversation, both speaker and listener must actively respond to what transpires by signaling involvement, either directly through words or indirectly through gestures or similar nonverbal signals" (1982: 1). As such, involvement necessarily precedes any kind of understanding, as a kind of preliminary threshold of knowledge: "Understanding presupposes conversational involvement. A general theory of discourse strategies must therefore begin by specifying the linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge that needs to be shared if conversational involvement is to be maintained […]" (Gumperz 1982: 2-3). Gumperz further recommends that research on involvement should look closely at cross-cultural communication, since that is where shared references cannot be assumed as easily or as deceptively as in intra-cultural communication.

What interests me more particularly about communicative involvement is Deborah Tannen's pursuit of the ideal into the domain of conversational rhetoric. Tannen finds that "involvement is created by the simultaneous forces of music (sound and rhythm), on the one hand, and meaning through mutual participation in sensemaking, on the other" (2007: 134). A key part of both the music and the participation is repetition. Text is repeated, over and over, with variations in different contexts, until that text carries with it the familiarity of involvement. Just think of the text "All things to all men/people". On another axis, text is repeated by the various participants in the conversation, over and over, backwards and forwards, with variations and contextual shifts. One could debate the ethics of Paul's strategies deep into the night. Through the repetition of text, through its internal and external iterations, it becomes a part of the receiving community, for better or for worse. Understanding, of whatever kind, may then follow.

To our knowledge, Nida does not really explore the multiple repetitions into which translations can enter. He does not really go into what happens to the translation once an authorized text has been agreed upon. This is a task that post-Nida scholarship should pick up seriously. To investigate the multiple practices of text use, and to develop a correspondingly broad concept of text usability, might help overcome some of the more narrow interpretations and applications of Nida. If that can be done, texts of all kinds, both translations and non-translations, might be seem more as points of departure than as dead-end arrivals.

Conclusions in partial defense of Nida

When a version of the above was presented at a conference, one of the representatives of the American Bible Society tried to imagine how Nida would have responded. The imagined answer was, "But of course…". Perhaps our interest in text use, our placing of virtue in involvement, our concern with where translations go rather than where they come from, perhaps all of that is so obvious to Bible translators that it need not be said. Then again, what is clear in practice is sometimes obscured by short-sighted theory.

Let us then try to formulate a few simple theoretical propositions that might indicate the direction we want to go in. To reach them, we put aside for the moment all the criticisms of Nida with which we have much agreement (the simple binarisms, the apparently one-sided preference, the appeals to a "response" never captured, the overtly

duplicitous subjectivity, the unquestioned assumption of evangelism as a right). Let us focus instead on a few positives:

1. The principle of dynamic translation potentially allows for many different translations, corresponding to many different modes of reception.
2. That plurality may build repetition and dialogue around the reception of translations.
3. The space of repetition and dialogue builds involvement in the text.
4. The intermediary's prime task is to create the conditions for involvement, as a necessary prelude to any sense of understanding.
5. The problem of translation is thus not so much the identity or non-identity of things (equivalence between texts or functions) but one of creating the involvement of people.

Seen in this light, the task of the intermediary becomes to extend involvement, not meaning. Text users will then create meanings for themselves. And if involvement is the prime and main goal, there need be no presumption on the part of the translator to have captured the one true meaning of the text, and thus no irredeemably violent imposition of the one true reading, and thus no devious self-delusion by which one identifies with a range of passive others. Involvement does not come by pretending to be someone else. All that is required is openness and a dash of humanist humility, even within ideologies of the saving of souls. Read in this way, and not especially as all things to all people, the insights of Eugene Nida might yet help spread democracy.

Note

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