Text analysis in Bible translation

Learners will be exposed to some fundamental principles of text analysis including:

- Communication Situation
- Discourse Genre
- Embedded Discourses
- Thematic and Non-thematic Material in Narrative Discourse

In translation we work with texts - not just words

Translation consists of transferring the meaning of the Source Language (SL) text into a text in the Receptor Language (RL). The receptor language is also called the Target Language. In Bible translation, the SL text is the portion of Scripture you will be translating. The RL text is the same Scripture portion in the language you will have learned before you begin to translate.

Discourse Analysis of Receptor Language Text. Prior to beginning translation, you, or someone else working in the receptor language, will have done text analysis (also called "discourse analysis") of the receptor language to determine the grammatical forms used to express meaning on every level.

Exegesis of Source Language Text. The first step in the actual process of translating is exegesis, which is "text analysis" to discover the meaning of the source language text or passage to be translated. In the model illustrated in *figure 1*, the downward arrow represents *exegesis*. The upward arrow represents the actual *translation*.[1]

Figure 1

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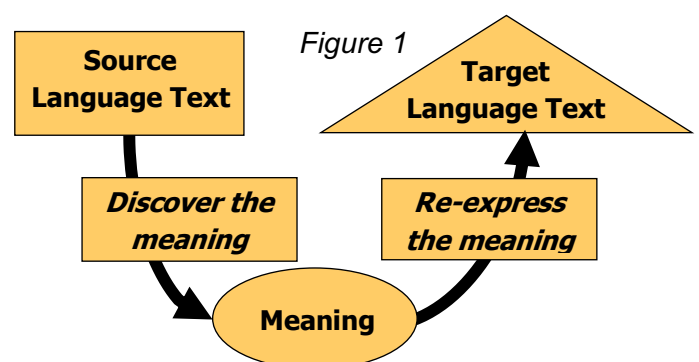
[1] Mildred L. Larson, *Meaning Based Translation: a guide to cross-language equivalence*, revised edition, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), p. 4 display 1.1; see also Katharine Barnwell, *Introduction to Semantics and Translation* (Horsleys Green, UK: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1974, 1980), p.14.

The Communication Situation[2]

In Bible translation, as in Bible teaching, it is dangerous to take a word, phrase, or verse out of context. However, it is important that we consider more than just the grammatical context. The Communication Situation includes the entire *life context*. Below are some features of the Communication Situation:

The Author. Who was the author? What was the attitude of the author toward the information he communicated? What was his attitude toward his target audience?

Purpose of Author. What is the discourse genre? (We will discuss this in a moment.) The particular discourse type chosen by the author will depend on his purpose for writing.

Audience/recipients. Who was the original audience? Where did they live? What was the relationship between the author and his audience? Who is your target audience? How much information is shared by the audience who originally read the source text and the audience who will read your translation? What was the educational level of the original audience? What is the educational level of your target audience?

Setting. What historical situation occasioned the original writing? What was the location of the writing? What was the time of the writing?

Culture. Culture is a complex set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share. The writer of the source document understood the culture of the audience for which he wrote. This mutual understanding affects the writing. As a translator, you will need to have a basic understanding of the cultural assumptions made by the author in order to accurately understand the meaning of the source text, and adequately translate it for a people who have a different set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules.

Discourse Genre[3]

One of the first things a translator needs to do is identify the discourse genre (discourse type) of the document or passage to be translated. Various discourse types are appropriate for writing about different kinds of subjects. There are many kinds of discourse genres in English, both written and spoken. For example the *Business Letter Genre*: certain features of business letters make them distinct from other written discourse. Also, the *Fairy Tale Genre*: What is the opening line of a Fairy Tale? And what is the closing line?[4]

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[2] Larson, *Meaning Based Translation*, pp. 34-36.
[3] Ibid., pp. 399-423.
[4] Answers: a) "*Once upon a time...*" b) "*...and they lived happily ever after.*"

In our discussion about Bible translation, we will limit our focus to three main types of discourse: *narrative*, *explanatory* and *hortatory*. These main types include sub-types which we will mention briefly, but not highlight.

Narrative Discourse. The normal purpose of narrative discourse is to relate a series of events—usually in the past—which is either real or imaginary (mythological). Narratives tell a story. Much of what is written in the four Gospels and the book of Acts is narrative discourse. Also most of the Old Testament portions recommended for a foundational teaching program are narrative. A sub-type of narrative discourse is "dialogue," which incorporates direct speech exchange along with a series of "narrative" events recounted by a narrator.

Explanatory Discourse. The normal purpose of explanatory (also called expository) discourse is to instruct or inform about a certain topic. A sub-type of explanatory discourse is "descriptive" which gives information about an item or event.

Hortatory Discourse. The purpose of hortatory discourse is to exhort, command, suggest, recommend, convince, deride, correct, warn, etc. A sub-type of hortatory discourse is "procedural," which imparts a step-by-step process.

Each language has its own way of constructing various discourse genres. It is important that every translator and cross-cultural communicator have a good understanding of how the target language constructs various kinds of discourses. The discourse structure of our translated materials needs to come through in a way that is clear and natural to the hearers.

Embedded Discourses

It is very common for a text to have one primary genre with several smaller embedded discourses of other genres. Direct speech within quotation marks is often embedded discourse material of another genre. In a *narrative* discourse, for example, a direct quote could be an embedded *explanatory* or *hortatory* discourse.

Here is an example from Mark chapter 1:
- **Verse 4** tells us that John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness. The text is narrative at this point.
- **Verse 5** continues the narrative telling about *all the people listening to John* and *being baptized by him*.
- Then **verses 7 and 8** contain a direct quote: "*After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and*

untie the thong of His sandals. I baptize you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

What genre is this direct quote? It is an embedded explanatory discourse. It gives an explanation about the coming Messiah. After the quote of verses 7 and 8, the narrative series of events is resumed in verse 9 with the statement, "*In those days Jesus came...*"

Later, in verse 15, we see another quote: Jesus said, "*...repent and believe in the gospel.*"
What genre is this direct quote? This is an embedded *hortatory* discourse. Jesus was giving an exhortation, instructing the listeners to follow a particular course of action.

Non-Thematic (Background) Material[5]

Another kind of embedded discourse is *non-thematic material* (also called background material) within a text. Non-thematic material is generally a short discourse of another genre, which reflects the perspective of the narrator.

There is an example of non-thematic material in the first part of Mark chapter 1.
  – In **verses 4 and 5** we see a series of events taking place: John preached, people came, people were baptized, and people confessed their sins.
  – Then in **verse 6** the narrator steps outside of the chronological series of events to give a description of John's clothing and food: "*John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.*"
  – After that, **verse 7** resumes the series of events with "John preaching..."

The narrator's comment in verse 6 is an *embedded explanatory discourse*. It is non-thematic (background) material. It is *not* part of the theme line; it is not included in the actual series of events.

Thematic and Non-thematic Information Defined[6]

Thematic information (foreground) in narrative discourse is:
  – The main event line
  – It is the plot; what actually happened

Non-thematic information (background) is:

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[5] Larson, *Meaning Based Translation*, pp. 441-57.
[6] Joseph Grimes, *The Thread of Discourse*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1975); Stout, M. and R. Thomson. "Kayapo narrative," in *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 37:250-256 (1971); Grimes, J. and N. Glock, "A Saramacan narrative pattern," in *Language* 46:408-425 (1970).

- − ...added to make the main series of events easier to understand
- − It is not really crucial to the plot
- − It identifies characters
- − Describes settings
- − Speaks of alternative possibilities that do not actually happen
- − And gives the narrator's personal ideas or experiences

Two Common Tests of Non-thematic Information:[7]

- − It can usually be left out without disturbing the rest of the narrative
- − It may be expressed at one of a number of points without affecting the theme line

For example, in Mark 1, if we left out the non-thematic information of verse 6, or moved it to another place in the narrative, the rest of the passage would still make sense from a purely grammatical perspective.

Or course, I am *not* suggesting that any translator leave out non-thematic material (or any other material) from a passage of Scripture! I am merely using this as an example of how the "tests" for non-thematic information work. These tests can help us identify non-thematic material within narrative discourse.

Examples from Genesis and Acts
Look at the examples below of thematic and non-thematic information. Compare each occurrence of non-thematic information with the *definition* of non-thematic information as explained above. Also notice how each occurrence meets the two "tests" of non-thematic information. Read through the left-hand column (*thematic* material) by itself, leaving out the right-hand column *(non-thematic* material). Notice that the theme line flows smoothly without the non-thematic information. Again, I am not suggesting anyone leave out non-thematic material when translating Scripture; I am merely using these examples for illustrative purposes.

Next, try moving some of the sections of non-thematic information, inserting them into different places in their respective texts.

It is not always possible to move every piece of non-thematic information. Just because you cannot move it, does not mean it is not non-thematic information. These "tests" are often helpful for identifying non-thematic material, but they are not foolproof.

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[7] Grimes, *The Thread of Discourse*.

Genesis 13:1-2

THEMATIC	NON-THEMATIC
So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had and Lot went with him.	
	Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.
From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel…	

Genesis 12:4-5

THEMATIC	NON-THEMATIC
So Abram left	
	as the Lord had told him:
and Lot went with him.	
	Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.
He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan…	

Acts 12: 2-4

THEMATIC	NON-THEMATIC
[Herod] had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.	
	This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.
After arresting him, he put him in prison…	

Non-Thematic Does NOT Mean "Unimportant"

Calling a portion of text "non-thematic" information does not mean it is not important. It may be a very important piece of information. It is called "non-thematic" simply because it does not cause the plot or main series of events to advance forward. Non-thematic information is a part of a discourse in the same way that a prefix or suffix is part of a word. Prefixes and suffixes are less

prominent than the central part of the word, but that does not mean they are not important.

On the word level, *nouns* and *verbs* usually have the greatest prominence. But that does not mean that *adjectives* or *connectors* are insignificant. They also play a very important role, even though they function in a "non-thematic" way. So it is in discourse. Thematic information has the most prominence, but non-thematic information is also important.

Grammatical Marking of Non-thematic Information

In Lamogai narratives, recapitulation (restatement) is a common way of marking non-thematic material. Normally there would be no recapitulation before the non-thematic information. Then after the non-thematic information, there would be recapitulation of the most recent clause of the event line—the clause that immediately preceded the non-thematic information. Look at the following example from a Lamogai text:

THEMATIC	NON-THEMATIC
We went with them and went and went and *arrived* at their village.	
	The name of their village is Tapulpu.
We *arrived* at their village and then we went to the men's house.	

Notice the recapitulation of the word "arrived," which picks up the theme line after the insertion of the non-thematic information.

Another Lamogai Example:

THEMATIC	NON-THEMATIC
As we were going, my wife and I *went on ahead*.	
	I was really sick. I was so sick I could hardly walk.
We *went on ahead* and we slept at Arar.	

In both of the abovementioned Lamogai examples, the recapitulation picks up the event line and flows on naturally just as if the non-thematic information was not there.
Recapitulation in Lamogai narratives preserves the continuity of the event line when non-thematic information is inserted.

English Does the Same Thing

In the example of Genesis 13:1-2, the word "Negev" acts as a link, picking up the theme line after the non-thematic material has been introduced within the series of events.

Genesis 13:1-2

THEMATIC	NON-THEMATIC
So Abram went up from Egypt to the _Negev_, with his wife and everything he had and Lot went with him.	
	Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.
From the _Negev_ he went from place to place until he came to Bethel…	

An Example from Mark 1
We already noted that Mark 1:6 is background (non-thematic) information. In verse 7, the theme line is picked up again by recapitulating the verb "preaching" from verse 4.

Mark 1:4-7

THEMATIC	NON-THEMATIC
[4]John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness _preaching_… [5]And all the country of Judea was going out to him…and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River…	
	[6]John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.
[7]And he was _preaching_ and saying…	

Avoiding Mismatch

Every language has its own way of handling _thematic_ and _non-thematic_ material. When a translator does not handle the _thematic_ and _non-thematic_ material correctly, it can be confusing to the reader. As a translation consultant, working with translators, this is an area that often requires special attention.

One time I was working through Mark 1:4-7 with an expatriate translator. The translator read the verses aloud in the target language, and then I asked one of the mother-tongue speakers to explain the meaning in Melanesian Pidgin (the trade language of Papua New Guinea). When he did, it was apparent that the non-thematic information was not handled correctly.

This is how the native speaker explained the passage to me in Melanesian Pidgin:

– John was preaching (people came, were baptized, etc.)...

– *Then John put on some clothes made of camel hair...*

– *Then he put a leather belt around his waist...*

– *Then he ate some locusts...*

– *And he ate some wild honey...*

– After John finished eating, he started preaching again...

The translator unintentionally translated the *non-thematic* material of verse 6 in such a way that it sounded like *thematic* material to the mother-tongue speakers.

Alternate Purposes of Discourse Genre (Skewing)[8]

In most cases, the discourse genre of each passage reflects the purpose of the author: *narrative* genre tells a story, *explanatory* genre instructs or explains, and *hortatory* genre exhorts. But sometimes authors use the various kinds of discourses to accomplish something other than their normal purposes. This is called "skewing."

For example, a *parable* is a "narrative" discourse, but the underlying purpose is *not* just to tell a story. It is usually intended to either exhort (hortatory), or to give an explanation (explanatory). We will talk more about "skewing" in later tutorials.

ACTIVITIES
Text analysis in Bible translation

1. Research and Compile Communication Situation Information for the Gospel of Mark

   ▪ Reread the notes at the beginning of this tutorial as a reminder of the kinds of information included in the "Communication Situation."

   ▪ When you research the Communication Situation, read through the book introduction at the beginning of the

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[8] Larson, *Meaning Based Translation*, pp. 419-20.

Gospel of Mark in a Study Bible. Also read through the introductory material in a commentary on the Gospel of Mark.

2. Read Mark chapters 1 and 2 in several different versions
    - Use both literal and nonliteral versions

    - Include other-language versions if you know another language

3. Locate and Identify Embedded Discourses in Mark 1 and 2 – Use *Activity Sheet 8.5*
    - Mark each *Quote*, identifying its discourse type: Explanatory, Hortatory or Narrative

    - Mark each instance of *Non-Thematic Material*, identifying its discourse type: Explanatory, Hortatory or Narrative

    - See sample below (on following page)

Mark 1 (NASB)

¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY;

³THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.' "

> Quote: Explanatory discourse

⁴John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

⁵And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

⁶John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.

> Non-thematic: Explanatory

⁷And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals.

⁸I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

> Quote: Explanatory discourse

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him;

¹¹and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

> Quote: Explanatory discourse

¹²Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness.

¹³And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

¹⁴Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God,

¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

> Quote: Explanatory and Hortatory discourse

¹⁶As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen.

> Non-thematic: Explanatory discourse

¹⁷And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."

> Quote: Hortatory discourse