

**TUTORIAL**  
**8.13**

# Assessing the translation

Learners will be introduced to the process and purpose of conducting a *Content Check* and a *Comprehension Check* of translated Scripture.

## Quality Control

The goal of every serious Bible translator is to translate the truths of Scripture accurately, clearly and naturally.<sup>1</sup> It is essential that all translated materials be carefully assessed in order to assure that this goal is fully reached. There are two main kinds of assessments: *Content Checks* and *Comprehension Checks*.

## The Content Check

The purpose of a content check is to make sure the “content” of the translated materials lines up with the “content” of Scripture. A content check is done by comparing the translated materials side-by-side with the source text.

Some questions that may be raised in a content check are as follows:

- Has any of the content of this Scripture portion been inadvertently left out of the translation?
- Has extra content been added without reason?
- Has the meaning of the source text been changed?
- Does the translation convey the same force and intensity of the source text, or is it unduly weak or unduly strong?
- Does the translation contain unnecessary ambiguities that could cloud the meaning?
- Does the translation include distracting connotations that may be inappropriately humorous or offensive?

Each portion of translated Scripture will likely go through the content checking process several times before it is finished. When I was translating the New Testament into Lamogai, I would do a content check of every translated passage at several points during the translation process, carefully weighing the translation against the source text. Some content checks were focused on low-

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<sup>1</sup> See: John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), pp. 34, 39-43, 58-62. See also Dave Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), chap. 5, pp. 85-98.

level details, and some were focused on higher-level discourse features, such as cohesion and boundaries in paragraphs and other large semantic units.

Once I was confident that the “content” of a portion of translated Scripture was basically what it needed to be, I would begin doing comprehension checks of the same portion.

## **The Comprehension Check**

The purpose of a comprehension check is to make sure the mother-tongue speakers can clearly understand the intended meaning of a translated portion of Scripture. When we do a comprehension check, we generally read a section of the translation aloud to a mother-tongue speaker and ask them relevant questions to determine how well they understand the meaning. When it becomes apparent in a particular verse or passage, that the meaning is not coming through clearly, the translator will work with target language speakers to determine what is hindering clear communication of the meaning.

Ultimately, our goal is that the translation will communicate clearly to a reasonable cross-section of our target audience, including men and women, older and younger people, those living nearby as well as those living farther away. Here are some sample comprehension check questions for Mark 2:

- In this story, why were there so many the people gathered together?
- Why were the four men trying to bring their friend to Jesus?
- Why were the scribes upset with Jesus?

## **Finding the Right Balance**

Obviously, there are details that the original readers understood that the average reader of a present-day translation will not know without teaching. It is not possible (nor is it advisable) to try to include every detail of meaning that the original audience may have known. However, we want to include enough details to make sure the translation paints a fair approximation of the picture perceived by the original readers and hearers.

A worthwhile exercise is to study a passage of Scripture to be translated, noting concepts that the original readers would have known. That does not mean every one of those details should be explicitly included in the translation. But working through that exercise can help the translator keep the perspective of the original readers in mind while translating that section.

See the sample “Culture Notes” chart for Mark 1 and 2 at the end of this tutorial.

## The Consultant Check

When a translator has finished translating a book of the Bible and has completed the necessary content checks and comprehension checks, the next step is to schedule a check administered by a Bible translation consultant.

In most cases the consultant will not be familiar with the target language, so the translator will need to create a “back translation.” A *back translation* is a fairly literal representation of the target language translation, turned back into English or another language that the consultant knows. The term “back-translation” is commonly abbreviated BT, or sometimes BTE (“back to English”), for a back-translation in English.

Below is a sample back-translation of the first part of Genesis chapter 1 from a real language. In creating a back-translation it is not necessary to strictly follow English grammar rules. Also, it does not need to be stylistically natural in English. The back-translation will likely reflect the style and grammar of the target language.

**Senesise 1**

**This is the very origin of the various other things that God created**

<sup>1</sup>In the very first origin God created the sky and the ground on which we live. <sup>2</sup>That ground which he created did not resemble the appearance of the ground which we now see. For that ground did not have various things, it was just there nothing. Above the ground there was deep water, then above that deep water there was darkness. And God Heart (the Holy Spirit) above the deep water was going gliding/soaring.

<sup>3</sup>Then God said that, It must be light, he said. And so in the way in which he said, it was light. <sup>4</sup>God, having seen that light, he said that, That light is good, he said. And so God separated into two the light and the darkness that were there. <sup>5</sup>Having separated them into two God, having seen the light, he said its name is light. Then having seen the darkness its name is darkness he said. That afternoon having finished, then the new morning having dawned that very first day began existing.

The consultant will use the *back translation* to do a content check of the translation, making sure nothing has been left out, or added unnecessarily, or changed. (See the list of content check considerations above.) Based on this content check, the consultant will write up a list of questions and comments identifying places where it appears that the “content” of the translation does not line up with the “content” of the source text. The consultant will send this write-up to the translator, who will work through the list of comments and suggestions, making adjustments where necessary. The consultant will also make affirming, positive comments about the translation where appropriate.

Content Check: Mark 1-8  
 Language: ???????  
 Translator: ??? ???????  
 Consultant: Dave Brunn

**Mk 1:3** – I see that your term for “wilderness” is “place where there are no people.” In your back translation (BT) it sounds kind of peculiar where it says: “*That man will yell where there are no people, ‘You people...’*” If the phrase “*where there are no people*” is a dead metaphor meaning “*wilderness*,” that’s fine, but if it will be interpreted literally that there really are no people there, it may seem odd that John the Baptist was yelling out to “people” where there are no people.

**Mk 1:4-15** – I like the way you handled the discourse-level transitions in these verses. I can tell you were taking the big picture of the passage into consideration.

**Mk 1:16** – Your BT says: “*Jesus walked **TO** the shore of the lake.*”  
 The SL says: “*Jesus walked **ALONGSIDE** the shore of the lake.*”

**Mk 1:30** – OMITTED: “laying sick”

**Mk 7:37** – DYNAMICS: Your word “startled” seems perhaps a bit weak for “astonished beyond measure.” Can you intensify it?

Next, the consultant will schedule a face-to-face comprehension check with the translator. In this part of the check, the consultant will meet together with the translator and some mother-tongue speakers of the target language—usually two or three. The consultant will ask the translator to read a few verses aloud, and then the target language speakers will be asked to explain the meaning of what was read. The consultant will follow up with more questions, digging deeper if necessary, to make sure the correct meaning is coming through clearly to the target language speakers. If a certain part of the translation is unintelligible, or if the target language speakers misinterpret what it is supposed to mean, the consultant, along with the translator and the mother-tongue speakers, will try to determine what the problem is and propose a possible solution.

Consultant checks are not foolproof, but they can be valuable for improving the quality of translated materials.



## ACTIVITIES

### *Assessing the translation*

1. Exchange your “rough draft” translation of Mark 2:1-12 with a fellow student. If you don’t know of any other students, contact *AccessTruth*.
2. Do a content check of the other student’s rough draft translation.
3. Refer to the list of content check considerations near the beginning of this tutorial
4. Be sure to make some positive comments along with your critique of the translation
5. Devise comprehension check questions for *your own* translation of Mark 2:1-12, to determine how well your translation is communicating.
6. If possible, find someone within your designated target audience and conduct a comprehension check. Read a few lines of your translation of Mark 2:1-12 and ask comprehension check questions that pertain to that section, to find out how well the hearer understands.