

## Some Thoughts on the Process of Translating The Urantia Book

On the observance of the death of Henry Begemann,  
a reprinting of his 1981 paper on translations.

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### **I. Something about translating in general**

Translating is an art. The translator should re-create the text in his own native language in such a way that the reader of the translation reacts to it as an English reader reacts to the English text. The beauty and characteristics of the text should be adequately expressed in a different language with its own beauty and idiom. If this is not done adequately, the translation becomes second-rate literature, and this, in the eyes of the readers, would reflect on the value of the Book.

Even though the translator has to comply with the demands of the language, the original text should be "sacred" to him. This is not only valid for our Book, but for every text. The translator is not the author, he has fully to respect the work of the author.

That translating is an art is indicated by the fact that in countries outside the U.S.A., which signed the Berne convention on the copyright, a translator is protected by law, even as is the author.

If you look into a dictionary, it is seldom that you will find for one English word one word also in the other language. It appears that the English word has several meanings, depending on the context; and besides that, it presents, very often, just a nuance of a meaning. The same meaning can be expressed by one or more synonyms, but with a difference in nuance. A good author has mastery over these nuances, he knows when to use a certain word and not a synonym of it. The authors of our Book, and the personality that translated the universe text into English, excel in this respect.

This makes great demands on a translator. He should have such a knowledge of the English language that he recognizes the nuances and understands why the author has used this word and not that. Only then, can he seek in his own language for words with the same nuance of meaning. The literary quality of a translation depends to a high degree on this aspect.

Closely related with this difficulty is the requirement of understanding the meaning of the text. The reason for the author to use one word, and not one of its synonyms is very often just to express his idea as clearly as possible. The same should apply to the translator. The better he understands the meaning, the more he will seek for the right word in his own language.

So, the translator is also an interpreter by reason of the choices he makes in interpreting the meaning and in choosing his word-nuances. His is a great responsibility. In the future, thousands of readers will study his rendering of the text.

What determines the choices of a translator ?

1. The context, the meaning, the nature of the particular part of the text he is translating at that moment.
2. His personal understanding of the meaning
3. The pre-conceived ideas of the translator. To give an example from experience: a translator who is versed in Oriental religious literature might be inclined to translate the word "lily" by "lotus"
4. Is the text-part idiomatic ? If so, he is justified in not translating literally, but may seek an adequate idiomatic expression in his own language or, if this is not possible, to translate in non-idiomatic wordings. But to differentiate between idiom and non-idiom requires a good knowledge of the English language. A simple example: "Going up to Jerusalem." As Holland is a flat country, we have no special expression for "going up." Translating this literally would make a strange impression in Dutch.
5. The word-sequence in a sentence is a means for the author to emphasize a certain point or meaning. The translator should feel this and respect it as much as possible. He should not take the easy way by translating in the normal word-sequence, but seek for an adequate expression in his own language. Understanding the meaning plays a role again.

6. What is beautiful in one language is not always beautiful in another. Here, the language into which is translated, should prevail. But in case this would be detrimental to the meaning, the latter should prevail. A good translator will do his utmost to harmonize beauty and meaning.

A translator finds himself often between "the devil and the deep blue sea." As a re-creator he needs liberty, while on the other hand he has fully to respect his text. The greatest liberty he may enjoy in the narrating parts of his text, but much less in the technical, philosophic, and religious parts. This does not mean though that he should translate such parts word-by-word. He even sometimes may use more than one word, or even a little parenthetical clause, to make the meaning clear in his translation.

If his translation should be re-translated literally into English again, it should not result in the English text verbatim, as this would mean that he has translated word-by-word, which results in an unreadable and unintelligible translation.

## **II. Translating the Urantia Book**

The style of the papers is not uniform; there exists a great difference e.g. between the style of the Divine Councilor, who indited the first papers, and the style of the Midwayers, who comment several times on the teachings of Jesus. As far as possible a translation should reflect this difference in style.

This clearly has been done by the Midwayer-translator. It is significant that for this most important work the Midwayer was chosen, who was considered to be the best linguist among about 11 000 Midwayers present on our planet. Even this personality prepared himself especially for this task, though the Midwayers may be presumed to understand our planetary languages extraordinarily well, owing to their long stay here. The universe does not look upon the work of translating our Book as a minor thing.

Even Midwayers, let alone the other authors, are far above us in comprehension and wisdom. When they express their inspiration and knowledge in our, to them primitive, language it is to be expected that their wordings will be pregnant. The authors and the Midwayer-translator have chosen their words and terms with the utmost care, and how disgraceful our attitude would be, if we contented ourselves with a hasty, superficial and ordinary translation.

The Midwayer-translator has deliberately used a lofty style. He often makes use of those meanings of words that are termed "archaic" in dictionaries. We should follow his example.

Our Book presents new truth and new knowledge. This results in new terminology, new names and new words. To translate new terms in another language demands some creativity if a literal translation is not well possible. In Dutch, e.g., there is no good equivalent for the word " Adjuster ". As this term is so often used in our book, it is not feasible to use several descriptive words. Then, the translator is dependent on inspiration to solve the problems. As the Book has been given here for a thousand years, the translator contributes to the coinage of the future language of his country. Again, haste and superficiality are to be avoided.

The same applies to the philosophy of our book. As so much differences exist in the world in terminology and concepts, a translator should be very careful in bringing out the concepts of our Book. To give an example: the French translator has translated the term "pattern" by "archetype". But this term has become widely known as a concept of Jung with quite a different meaning. We should be particularly careful not to give the reader occasion to get the impression that our Book has an esoteric character.

Undoubtedly the most important aspect of our Book is its spiritual character and message. If the Book is only read with the intellect and not with the heart also, no spiritual transformation in the reader will occur. A translation can be helpful or detrimental to this essential function of our Book. As has already been indicated above, the personality of the translator will be reflected in this work through his choices, interpretations and respect for the Book. The apostle Paul has written:

"The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Therefore, is it impossible that a mere professional translator, not being a believer and not being well versed in the teaching of our Book, could make a good translation of it.

Even if a translator is a believer, but is lacking in discernment of the depths in the teachings, this lack will show forth in his work. His translation becomes "flat", and becomes a handicap for the sincere student. An unspiritual translation might be called a "violated text"; a flat translation is something in between violated and good.

### **III. Requirements for a translator of the Urantia Book**

Spirituality is the foremost requirement, as has already been indicated above. This quality is difficult to measure, but nevertheless the Trustees of URANTIA Foundation, who are ultimately responsible for any translation, should give due attention to this essential point.

Then, there are the moral requirements. Translating our Book is a tremendous opportunity to serve. And service is the basic universe attitude. But at our level (at least), there is also the temptation of pride. This the translator should oppose within himself, and realize the satisfactions of working for the Father and with the Father. There should be no self-seeking nor money-making annexed with this work, though this does not necessarily mean that some translator, who needs financial support to be able to give his time to this work, should be denied such support. Without a high motivation, it seems hardly possible to persist in this difficult, quiet work that takes so many years. The name(s) of the translator(s) should not appear on the front-page of the translation.

Among the intellectual requirements are to be mentioned:

- A good cultural stature;
- A good feeling for style;
- A certain talent for translating, love for languages and their beauties; and
- A good command of the vernacular.

Surprisingly this last element proves to be one of the greatest difficulties for translators. One discovers soon that one uses only a very limited part of one's own native language. Of course, he should have a good knowledge of English. A basic knowledge plus a dictionary will not do. Very often, the translator has only a partial knowledge of the meanings and nuances of a word. A translator should know when to look in a good dictionary, and that will be more often, much more, than one is inclined to think. There is a reciprocal relation between understanding the contextual meaning and its expression in the English language. If the translator is willing to exert himself to understand the reasoning or logical sequence in the text this will also necessitate him to study carefully its linguistic expression.

Dictionaries are the tools of a translator. Without good tools, he can hardly do a good job. A simple dictionary only gives some meanings of a word. A good dictionary also gives quotations in which the various nuances are illustrated. This is what a translator needs, and not only of the English language, but also of the vernacular. Explicit dictionaries are a must when a translator has to create a new terminology.

### **IV. The technique of translating**

That we owe it to the Revelators to handle their text with the utmost respect and care, has been stated above already. That striving for perfection is wholly in accordance with our Book, nobody will deny. Nevertheless, the words "perfectionism" and "perfectionist" are some times used in connection with translating The URANTIA Book. In the philosophical sense, a perfectionist is somebody who believes that perfection can be reached in this life. This is not what our Book teaches. In daily life, we often designate somebody a perfectionist if there is a significant discrepancy between the value of the work undertaken, and the effort which is given to it. Jesus, when a boat builder, strove for perfection in the essentials but wasted little time on trifles.

So, our problem really is: what are essentials and what are trifles? The Divine Counselor says on the first page of the Foreword that he has made every effort to convey the meanings in word symbols of the English language, though this has been exceedingly difficult, due to the paucity of our languages. From this, it may be deduced that these Revelators considered the expression of their teachings as essential. This is even clearer when the Midwayer, who restated the life and teachings of Jesus, explains on page 1343 his technique.

"We assembled his data from more than two thousand human beings, knowing that concepts which have their origin in human minds," are more acceptable and helpful for us; but, nevertheless he has adapted these verbal expressions the better to conform to the real meaning. What tremendous work! But it is meant not just for us, but for "all future generations", it should be clear therefore, that the quality of the translation should be excellent. Let us always remember:

"...it is repugnant to the divine nature to suffer any sort of deterioration or ever to permit the execution of any personal act in an inferior way..."

There always will be pressure from the field to speed up a translation. When we try to find and follow the Father's way, it seems inevitable that we will meet temptation to try the human way. In the field of translation the human way presents itself in two aspects: haste or lowering our standards.

As to haste, we should have faith in the Father's way: "the best way is the night way..." It also is the most practical way! The Father's way does not mean neglecting or ignoring the reactions from the field. Though keeping strictly to our standards and values, we should seek diligently for practical solutions, and they can be found. I'll come back to this later. It is essential that a translator works not under the burden of the pressure of time. In the beginning of my translator activity I sometimes worked a whole day on a sentence, though this of course is exceptional. Creating a new terminology cannot be done in haste. Such needs time to mature. Time for meditation on a difficult text is also a necessity.

The other temptation to shortcut the Father's way is lowering our standards. And then, the excuse is made sometimes that, though the first edition might be far from perfect, this could be improved in later editions, this implies however that the Foundation should knowingly publish a URANTIA Book ( a translation also is a URANTIA Book ), that is not in accordance with the English text. From the standpoint of the buyer of such an edition, he may later rightly discover that a bad quality thing was sold him. And as the readers form study groups, as we hope they will do, different editions will be used in these groups. To realize what this should mean, let us imagine for a moment that the book had been given in Dutch, and later translated into English. Now the study-groups in America use editions that differ in many places. Which text is correct? On which words can be depended? What will be changed in the next edition?

Should not this difficult passage, which we read at this moment, be changed so that it becomes clearer? And so on...

A provisional edition is no solution. Because the Father's way is the best way and the most practical way, there can always be found better solutions.

Time-pressure takes away the joy in the privilege of doing this work, and this blocks for the translator the channel of communion through which the invisible helpers can assist in this most important work.

So far, I wrote only about a translator, but in reality a team is a necessity for translating the Urantia Book, because:

1. A team is helpful in preventing subjective interpretations;
2. The total force of a group, working together harmoniously, is much greater than the sum of the force of its individual members;
3. One or two translators could claim the moral right; a team however, working really as a team, produces a collective work and has no moral right;
4. A team is stimulating for its members. Translating our Book is a job of many years. There is more stability and endurance in a team. If an individual member discontinues for some reason, the work can easier go on.

Nevertheless the translation could be started by one or two persons, while later this activity may be expanded to a team-activity. A team should consist of at least three members. Five members could be possible also if they live in the same neighborhood. More about this later.

Where should the translators begin? Not with the difficult parts of the Book, especially not with the Foreword. Translating our Book is a thing that must be learned. If you take driving lessons, you do not begin with driving during rush-hour in a crowded city. The art of translating must gradually be mastered. Insight in the meaning, a most important factor in translating, is also a progress of inner growth.

The first product of a team is not the final draft. In the beginning, several drafts are made, which means that several times the first draft is revised and corrected. Later, it becomes somewhat easier through acquired experience. Here, in Holland, we work this moment with a team of three. The first draft is made by an individual member. The second draft is made by the leader of the team, while this second draft is checked in a meeting of the complete team. Then, we leave it until the whole Book will be translated in this way. Only then, the final draft can be made. This cannot be done earlier.

Apart from the final polishing of the translation, care should be given to a consistent use of terms and names. To facilitate this, a card-index has been kept of these words. Interesting it is to observe on the cards how the understanding and correlated rendering of the concepts grow in the course of the years. For some words we have already filled up four cards different contexts of the word and different translations. The final choice must be made when the final draft is made. Not only does the understanding of the concepts grow, but also the skill to find adequate translations. A card-index is a necessity from the beginning. From my own personal experience, and from my experience in working with two teams, I would advise a translator to begin with the Jesus papers.

## **V. Working together in a team**

In our universe career, we will get extensive training in teamwork. But only when we have attained the superuniverse will we experience salvation from self. (1113-2) Hereby is indicated the difficulty of working in a team, as a team, but also the great privilege of this kind of work. The universe career starts on Urantia. The co-operation in a team will succeed, with commensurate results, in the measure the personalities in the team succeed in overcoming the ego. There must be (not should be) a willingness to sacrifice one's own opinion to the consensus of the team, and this without bad feelings or discontent.

Another rule in the Universe is that every project, even if it requires only the co-operation of two personalities, should have a leader. Always one person has to assume the responsibility. But on our level, leadership is very often a problem.

A leader should sincerely and continually seek to lead by true serving. The greatest should be the server of all. If his conduct continually causes irritation, he should be helped to change for the better, or else he should be put off the team. On the other hand, if a member continually causes irritation, and the leader does not succeed in lovingly helping him to overcome this fault, such a member should be put off the team, in consent with the other member(s) of the team.

Such unpleasant situations should be prevented as far as possible by selection of the members not only on technical qualities, but not less on personal qualities and maturity. It is very difficult to have immature persons in the team, especially, of course, as leader of the team.

A good working-climate is fostered by mutual friendliness, patience, respect, appreciation, and love. It should be clearly visible that, in the team, true Urantia Book students work together, sons of one Father whom they all love wholeheartedly. Notwithstanding the difficulties and dangers, working in a good team and accomplishing his great task, brings with it true satisfaction and great joy.

## **VI. Organization of the team**

Ideal would be a team that constantly could work together in meetings, but practice will mostly be quite different, e.g. because the members do not live in the same neighborhood, or cannot give equal time to this work.

The practical way, then, will be that the two members of the team make the first draft, and send these to the leader, who corrects and revises these drafts and types this second draft in triplicate, sending copies to the members. These members can in their turn check the second draft. Preferably, these latter corrections should be discussed in a meeting of the team. If the quality of the second draft might suffer from the impossibility of frequent meetings, the third draft should compensate for this, as by the time the second draft of the whole Book has been completed, the abilities through this long experience will have grown, so that the deficiencies of the second draft can easier be repaired.

From what is said above, it becomes already better understandable why a team should consist of a very limited number of translators. I even prefer three instead of five. But this does not mean that no other persons could be involved in this work, without being members of the team.

Each translator could be assisted by persons of his own choosing, who help him in making or correcting the first draft, before he sends it to the leader. Such assistants could also make first-draft translations themselves, while the team member, who has to take the responsibility for the draft of his assistant, could correct it. This may speed up the progress of the work, especially if a team member has not sufficient time available for translation. But it is a well-known fact that correcting a bad translation takes more time than making a new translation instead.

But it should be remembered that in the beginning of this translation activity the purpose not only is to get production, but also to learn how to translate. So, the extra time spent on an inferior translation is not always lost. Even from negative results one can learn.

If the leader gets overburdened by the quantity of first drafts which he must correct, and shape into a second draft, he also should try to find assistance, even if it only should be for typing. Another task he has is to keep the card index up to date, and to supply the other members with duplicates of these cards. Assistants can do much of this work.

There are many passages in the Book which are difficult to understand or which could be translated in different ways. A good translation presupposes understanding the text, because translating is also interpreting. The team will probably feel the need for interpretational advice. The Foundation, who bears the final responsibility for the translation, should appoint such an advisor, or advisory team, who could also check the second draft on its spiritual, interpretational quality. Though it is not necessary that such an advisor or advisors should have the same thorough knowledge of the language into which is translated, some knowledge of that language seems advisable, though the meaning of the English text can be asked and explained in English.

## **VII. Translation in a virgin country**

By a "virgin" country, I understand in our context a country where the Urantia Book is rather unknown, where there are yet only a few readers.

It is quite natural for readers in a non-English speaking country to ask for a translation. As such readers have generally no personal experience in translating, and certainly not in translating our Book, they may simply expect that the Foundation can supply them with a translation in just a few years, as they suppose that this is only a matter of finances. You pay a good professional translator and soon, you will have your translation! Let them compare the translations of the Bible with that of our Book, which contains so much more text. The King James Version, which was, as its name indicates, a revision of existing translations, took the time of 54 translators during seven years. The Dutch "Statenbijbel" which was a new translation, took nearly twenty years of the time of many theologians who were mandated for this work.

An aspect of translation, which we already discussed, is confirmed in an article about Bible translation in the Encyclopedia Britannica, 200th anniversary. ed. (3-582):

"The mystery of meaning that attaches to any translation is infinitely heightened when the words are those of Holy Scripture. Every translation is an act of creation; a translation therefore may be an act of impiety if it implies modifying the creative impulse of God"

Though this has been written on the basis of the creedal belief that the Bible is more or less the word of God himself, it is of some import for the translation of our Book also.

A group of readers that desires to have a translation should begin this task themselves. At first there may not be well-qualified persons available. But one reader or a few readers could begin for the purpose of helping interested fellows who do not understand English sufficiently. In this way a study-group can begin to function, and so, the translation activity at once, contributes to the spreading of the teachings. If the group is sincere and dedicated, it will become a growing group, and there will be more choice for selecting translating team members and assistants. During this very imperfect first-draft translation, experience and understanding will grow, and in due time a second draft may be attempted. Let them be patient. A good translation may take

between ten and thirty years. During this time, these Brothers generally do not need money, but spiritual support, sympathy, interest, and interpretational assistance. If the spirit of service pervades this activity, it will bless not only the translators, but the whole budding Urantia movement in that locality, even in the whole country. And in the case of a language like Spanish, even an international team could be formed.

Working in this way for the kingdom is highly satisfying, fosters spiritual growth and insight, and brings forth the fruits of the spirit, while the spreading of our Book is promoted. And all this without heavy burdens for the Foundation. I have never met a translator who wanted to be paid for this work. But in case the product of the team should be distributed to study group members, an arrangement must be made with the Foundation.

I think I see a parallel between praying, and asking for a translation. One of the conditions for effective prayer is:

"You must have honestly exhausted the human capacity for human adjustment. You must have been industrious." (1002-9)

Wassenar, Holland H. Begemann. May 1981