Do not let the world squeeze you into its fungus

By Jonathan Phillips

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In Romans 12, when Paul urged the believers, “Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold," English language readers know he doesn't mean they should prevent the world from squishing them into some fungus. But what happens when you translate dual meaning words or phrases into another language? Especially when dealing with theological concepts?

In the past few months, I have become more involved in the ministry of literature development in Romania. That doesn't mean that I'm translating books myself. Instead, it means that as literature coordinator, I assign tasks to skilled Romanians who function as translators, editors, and proofreaders.

When I receive a translation back from a translator, I read through it, next to the English original, making sure the translator understood the meaning of the English. This is called the "content edit," which is best done by a native English speaker who knows Romanian. When I'm done, I forward it (along with any suggestions for correction that I've made) to a Romanian editor who makes sure that it sounds right in Romanian. Finally, when the editing stages are complete, it is given to a proofreader to catch any grammatical or punctuation errors. The layout can then be done, and then it can be published.

While doing the content edit there are three main things that I am especially looking for.

First, I am making sure that the Romanian translator understood the English original. Even the very best translator can get lost in a complex English sentence, misinterpret an English idiom, or miss a biblical allusion. (This is also why Google Translate will never take the place of a skilled translator!) Here are a few examples -- not to make fun of a translator -- but to show how difficult translation is.

“Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold” was translated as “Do not let the world squeeze you into its fungus.” Yes, mold is a type of fungus, but not in this case!

A “novel experiment” was translated to mean an experiment about books.

In one case “sentence” was referring to the grammatical structure, but it was translated as a verdict (like a death sentence).

The “age old problem” was translated as the “old age problem.”

I was really confused at one particular translation. The word “quest” was translated as the Romanian word for “visitor.” Then I realized that the translator had seen flip-flopped the tail on a q for a g, turning “quest” into “guest.”

Second, I check theological terminology and biblical references. Sometimes a translator will translate a Bible verse quotation from English rather than opening their Romanian Bible and inserting the passage in Romanian. Other times, verses aren’t directly quoted, but alluded to, such as the least of these, my brethren. The Romanian translator may not be familiar enough with the English Bible to know that is a reference to Matthew 25.

There was one book in which the author relied exclusively on the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible. In fact, this author devoted a whole paragraph to the fact that one verse began with the word “therefore.” However, no such word begins the Romanian equivalent, so that paragraph had to be drastically rewritten in order to make sense to Romanian readers. In the same book, the author often used the NIV translation “sinful nature” for the Greek word “flesh.” The translator had translated the author’s words “sinful nature” into Romanian, without realizing that it is making reference to the biblical word “flesh.”

Nazarene authors tend to use the “Christian perfection” and “perfect love” in the way John Wesley intended, with “perfect” meaning “complete” rather than the now-popular notion of “without mistake or flaw.” The Romanian language has two words. “Perfecțiune” is the “perfect” that means “without mistake,” whereas “desăvârșire” is the word used in every Romanian translation of the Bible to mean “complete.” This second word is the term we want to use in our books, but often a translator unfamiliar with biblical terminology uses “perfecțiune,” which conveys a completely different meaning to the reader.

Third thing I look for is the appropriateness to the Romanian context. Some translators feel that they need to translate exactly what is in English, even if it doesn’t make any sense to Romanian readers. While it is important to remain as close to the original as possible, it is also important to convey the author’s original meaning, even if the form is different.

A book of children’s ministry activities published in Romanian in 2001 says “You will need mini marshmallows and a microwave oven.” Hardly anyone in Romania had a microwave in 2001, and you still can’t get mini marshmallows here. This wasn’t adapted to the culture. Even though it was translated, it was useless, especially with the words “you will NEED” which implies no substitutions.

One book used the illustration of something like “everyone enjoys a good baseball game.” Well, that may be true in America, but not in Romania. So, by changing the word “baseball” to “soccer,” we kept the author’s original meaning.

Of course, I could go on about other examples, but I think these give an overview of the types of things that the editing process serves to catch.

A few weeks ago, I visited a Christian bookstore in Bucharest. I wanted to buy some resources for the theological library of European Nazarene College [7]’s Romanian Learning Center. I was glad to see that excellent resources had been translated into Romanian. But as I flipped through the pages, I saw that they lacked theological editing. Allow me to explain by sharing what I found in two of the books. In one Bible dictionary, the term that was used for “justification” isn’t the biblical term. Instead, they used the legal word because it looks most like the English word. The same dictionary used the word for “mystery” that conjures up images of Sherlock Holmes or murder mystery stories instead of the biblical word used for divine mystery. The other book was one on Christian perfection. Since it is rare to find Wesleyan resources in Romanian, I was glad to see that this book had been published, that is, until I realized that throughout the entirety of the book, the word “perfection” was translated incorrectly. The translator used the term which means sinless perfection instead of completeness or wholeness.

After that visit to the bookstore, I began to really think about what Romanians are reading. These aren’t simply grammatical or spelling errors. I can live with those (although I’d rather not!). Since someone was in a hurry to translate and publish a book and skipped the theological editing stage, it means that the spiritual development of potentially thousands of Romanian Christian readers will be formed using language that isn’t biblical, which, in some cases, paints a very different picture of God and Christianity.

Literature development is a ministry that includes more than simply translation. It also includes the important stage of theological editing, to make sure that what the author intended to say is what the translation conveys to the reader. Here in Romania, we have the potential through literature to impact a much larger number of Christians than our relatively small church membership. What message do we want to convey?

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