

One of the reasons for memorizing sections of scripture is to be able to give them to others in their pure form. But then, isn't the original Persian or Arabic more pure than the translation? Doesn't that mean that people who read the scriptures in the original have better access to them? And they, more than others, would be able to answer our questions. If we went down that path, we would end up with something like religious experts, who have the teachings in a more pure form. But we cannot say that the 'pure form' doesn't matter. As a translator, I think about these issues a lot.

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Subject: Memorization, translation, knowing stuff
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On 9 Dec 2007 at 19:01, XX wrote:

> In many of our discussions we find disagreements to the meanings of
> things and someone invariably will offer something from the original
> language that seems to modify our understanding. So my question is
> whether the power of the Word of God is the same in English or any
> other language for that matter.

I think the Word is not the same thing as the words. The Word is the rationale of the universe, and the person of the Manifestation, and the central message of His teachings, and it is not 'said' in any language except perhaps the angelic tongue. But we learn about the Word through actual words in languages, and these words and languages matter, because they are one of the sources of misunderstandings that can get in the way of us hearing the Word. For instance, someone may read Baha'u'llah saying: "He that bringeth forth no fruit is fit for the fire" and think he is talking about men that have no children, or reads "Fear ye God, and follow not every contumacious oppressor" and doesn't know what contumacious means, or reads Abdu'l-Baha saying "The White Hand shall cleave an opening to this sombre night" and can't imagine what he's talking about. The first is the problem of recognising metaphorical language, the second is ignorance of vocabulary and style, which can get in the way, the third is not having enough background knowledge to understand the words. All of these problems are found in the Persian and Arabic texts, for people who read those languages, just as much or even more than in the translations (the translator often explains allusions, or searches out the difficult word for us). The Writings use words that are not common

in Persian or Arabic, or they use them with a different meaning, so that native-speakers sometimes misunderstand.

To recognise when something is literal and when metaphorical, we have to have an overall idea of what the 'message' is and what the world is like and what reason tells us about the world, so that we can see, for instance, that Baha'u'llah would not say that a childless man is fit for the fire, and that the stars cannot literally fall to the earth.

To understand a reference such as the "white hand" we have to know the story of the miracle of Moses. If we do not have the necessary knowledge, we can create a non-meaning, an absurdity, that then gets in the way of us hearing the Word and responding to it. But lack of knowledge does not **have** to create a barrier: we can also realise that we do not understand something and decide **not** to fill the gap with our own suppositions. Sometimes we think we understand and do not realise that we have made a misunderstanding, but once again this does not **have** to get in the way, so long as we always bear in mind that what we think we understand is limited, relative, and likely wrong in parts.

With the purest of motives and the most sincere search, still we find ourselves with misunderstandings that do get in our way of responding to the Word. Knowledge can then help : we can ask people who might know, we can study ourselves. Knowledge is important: God is the all-knowing (and the Questioner) and we are supposed to acquire the attributes of God, and Abdu'l-Baha quotes the Quran saying ""Are they equal, those who know, and those who do not know?... Or is the darkness equal with the light?"[Qur'án 39:12; 13:17.] (in Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 32). Yet it is not the case that you need a certain amount of knowledge or the right languages to hear the Word. At most, better knowledge and language skills can remove misunderstandings that you've created yourself. I think it works mainly the other way around: when you've heard the Word and committed yourself to responding to it and working for good in the world, you need knowledge and skills to serve people and advance society, and your attraction to the Manifestation will lead you to studying the writings for its own sake. Sacred study is part of the religious life, just like prayer and fasting.

Because we can create our misunderstandings in any language, it makes sense that the Persian and Arabic speakers turn to Shoghi Effendi's translations, as AA and BB say. That shows that being able to read the text in the original doesn't give anyone a fundamental

advantage in understanding, yet it is also true that having more than one way of approaching a text makes it harder for us to make misunderstandings.

There is something else about the rhetorical power and poetic beauty of the original. No translation, not even those of Shoghi Effendi, catches more than a portion of this. But this aesthetic aspect is distinct from the creative power of the Word, which is in the message. At most, the aesthetic element can open the door somewhat, and make us more receptive. For instance, if someone chants the Writings beautifully, or introduces them with touching music or dance, they are clothing the Writings in an experience of beauty that can make us more ready to stretch ourselves further, to grasp a message that is out of the ordinary. The beauties of language that Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha weave through their message - rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, allusion, poetic and historical allusions - do the same thing. It is true that these are mostly lost in translation, but I do not think that someone who cannot read the text in the original language loses most of the meaning. They get most of the meaning, but without (almost) all of the original literary beauties -- and in place of that, they get whatever literary beauties the translator can produce.

Sen