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Charles Barber (1972) introduces us to a short passage from the Bible, which has been translated into English at many different times. The passage is from Chapter XV of Luke, and is the end of the story of the Prodigal Son. To facilitate matters, let us quote four different versions of the same material. The first one is from the New English Bible published in 1961.

Passage A:

25Now the elder son was out on the farm; and on his way back, as he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26He called one of the servants and asked what it meant. 27The servant told him, 'Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and pleaded with him; 29but he retorted, 'You know how I have slaved for you all these years; I never once disobeyed your orders; and you never gave me so much as a kid, for a feast with my friends. 30But now that this son of yours turns up, after running through your money with his women, you kill the fatted calf for him.' 31'My boy,' said the father, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32How could we help celebrating this happy day? Your brother here was dead and has come back to life, was lost and is found.'

The second one is from the Authorized Version of 1611.

Passage B:

25Now his elder sonne was in the field, and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard muiscke & dauncing. 26and he called one of the servaunts, and asked what these things meant. 27And he said vnto him, Thy brother is come, and thy father hath killed the fatted calfe, because he hath receiued him safe and sound. 28And he was angry, and would not goe in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. 29And he answering said to his father, Loe, these many yeeres doe I serue thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandement, and yet thou neuer gauest mee a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: 30but as soone as this thy sonne was come, which hath deououred thy liuing with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calfe. 31And he said vnto him, Sonne, thou art euer with me, and all that I haue is thine. 32It was meete that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is aliue againe: and was lost, and is found.
The third one is from John Wycliffe’s translation in the late 14th century.

Passage C:

25 Forsoth his eldere sone was in the feeld, and whanne he cam and nei3ede to the hous, he herde a symfonye and a croude. 26 And he clepide oon of the seruauntis, and axide what thingis thes were. 27 And he seide to him, Thi brodir is comen, and thi fadir hath slayn a fat calf, for he resseyued him saf. 28 Forsoth he was wroth, and wolde not entre: thereotype his fadir yde out, bigan to preie him. 29 And he answeringe to his fadir seide, Lo, so manye seeris I serue to thee, and I brak neuere thi commandement, thou hast neuere gyven me a kyde to me, that I schulde ete largely with my frendis. 30 But aftir that this thi sone, which deuouride his substaunce with hooris, cam, thou hast slayn to him a fat calf. And he seide to him, Sone, thou ert euere with me, and alle myne thingis ben thyne. 32 Forsoth it bihoft to ete plenteuously, and for to joye: for this thi brother was deed, and lyued aseye: he peryschide, and he is founden.

Our fourth and final one is from a manuscript of about the year 1000.

Passage D:

25. Söölice hys yldra sunu was on æcere; and hë cöm, and þa hë þam hüsæ genælæhte, hë gehyrde þone swëg and þæt weryd. 26. þa clypode hë anñe þëow, and æxode hine hwæt þæt wære. 27. Þæ cwæð hë, þin bröðor cöm; and þin fæder ofslöð an fæt celf, for þam þe hë hyne hálne onfeng. 28. Þæ bealh hë hine, and nole in gän. þa ëode his fæder út, and ongan hine biddan. 29. Þæ cwæþ hë his fæder andswarigende, Efne swä fea geara ic þæ þëowuide, and ic næfre þin bebob ne forgýmde; and ne sealdest þu më næfre är ticcen þæt ic mid minum frëondum gewistfullude; 30. ac syðdan þës þin sunu cöm þe hys spëde mid myltystrum amyrdre, þu ofslöge him fætt celf. 31. Þæ cwæþ hë, Sunu, þu eart symle mid më, and ealle mine þing synt þine; 32. þë gebyrede gewistfullian and geblissian, for þam þës þin bröðor was dëad, and hë geedcucedæ; hë forwearð, and hë is gemët.

Barber’s intention here is obviously to present evidence showing how differen OE, ME, Early Modern and present–day English are from each other, and also to attract our attention to the fact that the rate of change has varied; the linguistic differences between the New English Bible and the Authorized Version, which are separated by three and a half centuries, are less than those between the Authorized Version and the Wycliffe Bible, which are separated by about two and a quarter centuries, and the
differences between the ME and OE versions are surprisingly great. His conclusion is that the twelfth century and the fifteenth century were periods of particularly rapid change in English. This is a well known fact and can be explained pretty easily from a historical point of view. In this paper, we are not concerned with his conclusion, but with his rather casual comment he made on Passage A, i.e. ‘There is perhaps a certain unevenness of manner in that, but at any rate it is twentieth-century English, with nothing archaic or affected about it.’ What does he mean by ‘a certain unevenness of manner’ and what factors are responsible for that?

II

Many twentieth century versions have been attempting to introduce more colloquial forms of expression in place of the formal and sometimes stilted language of the Authorized Version. However, now that Barber mentions it, we must pinpoint the unevenness of manner or style in Passage A, before we go any further.

From the viewpoint of Modern English syntax there are three awkward sentences, which do not quite fit in with the context.

(1) Now the elder son was out on the farm; and on his way back, as he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. (25)
(2) His father came out and pleaded with him; but he retorted,... (28–29)
(3) I never once disobeyed your orders; and you never gave me so much as a kid,...(29)

In (1), (2) and (3), there is an unevenness of manner which comes from using lots of short phrases joined only by the word “and” if joined at all. And instead of using a semi-colon, these sentences could have been joined smoothly.

Thus,

(1') Now when the elder son was on his way back from the farm, he heard music and dancing as he approached the house.
(2') When his father came out and pleaded with him, he retorted...
(3') I never once disobeyed your orders, but you never...

Here let us make a survey of the history of English translations of the Bible by comparing these particular sentences found not only in Passages A–D above, but in seven other English versions —— Tyndale (1525), Great Bible (1539), Geneva Bible (1560), Bishops’ Bible (1568), Rheims (1582), American Standard Version (1881), and Revised Standard Version (1946). In addition, we shall make occasional references to the Greek and Vulgate versions, and to Luther’s translation and the French version as well.

(1)
OE: Sōðlice hys yldra sunu waes on æcere; and hē cōm, and ĵā hē ĵām hūse genēlǣhte,
he gehyrde þone swēg and þæt weryd.

Wycliffe: Forsoth his eldere sone was in the feeld, and whanne he cam and neiȝede to the hous, he herde a symfonye and croude.

Tyndale: The elder brother was in the felde, and when he came and drewe nye to the housse, he herde minstrelcy and daunsynge,...

Great: The elder brother was in felde: and when he came and drewe nye to the housse, he herde mynstelsy and daunsynge,...

Geneva: Now the Elder brother was in the field, and when he came and drewe nere to the house, he heard melodie, and dancing,...

Bishops': The elder brother was in the field: and when he came and drewe nye to the house, he heard mynstelsy and daunsynge,...

Rheims: But his elder sonne was in the field, and when he came and drewe nigh to the house, hee heard musicke and dauncing:,...

AV: Now his elder soonne was in the field, and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musicke & dauncing.

ASV: Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing.

RSV: Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

NE: Now the elder son was out on the farm; and on his way back, as he approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

As far as (1) is concerned, it would be convenient to ignore the start of that for a moment and to concentrate on the latter half beginning with ‘and on his way back’. You will notice that there is little if any difference in style among them in that they have two finite verbs (came and drew). Only the NE version has one finite verb. In that sense, it may be said to be more like the Greek version:

Greek: και ὢς ἔρχουσαν ἡγίσεν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, ἡκουσαν συμφωνίας καὶ χορῶν,

Vulgate: ...: et cum veniret, et appropinquaret domui, audivit symphoniam, et chorum:

Unfortunately, however, it is difficult to classify the translations into two or three groups according to their similarity to either the Greek version or the Vulgate. What is clear here is that the awkward syntax is the result of the long history of English biblical translation from the OE period to the twentieth century. All individual translators and committees specially appointed for this purpose must have consulted, or been influenced by, the earlier versions both in English and in other languages, especially Greek and Latin.

(2)

OE: þā êode his fæder ūt, and ongan hine biddan. Þā cwæp hē his fæder andswarigen-de,

Wycliffe: ...therefore his fadir ȝede out, bigan to preie him. And he answeringe to his
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fadir seide,...
Tyndale: Then came his father out and entreated him. He answered and sayde to his father,...
Great: Then came hys father out, and entreated him. He answered and sayde to his father,...
Geneva: ... : therefore came his Father out and entreated him. But he answered and said to his Father,...
Bishops’: ... : therefore came his father out, and intreated him. He answering, said to his father,...
Rheims: His father therefore going forth began to desire him. But he answering said to his father,...
AV: ...therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father,...
ASV: ... : and his father came out, and entreated him. But he answered and said to his father,...
RSV: His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father,...
NE: His father came out and pleaded with him; but he retorted,...

What is interesting about (2) is that the second half is translated, roughly speaking, in two ways, i. e., as either ‘answering’ or ‘answered’. Here look at the Greek version and the Vulgate:

Greek: ο δὲ πάτηρ αὐτοῦ ἐξελθὼν παρεκάλει αὐτόν. ο δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν τῷ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ.
Vulgate: Pater ergo illius egressus, coepit rogare illum. At ille respondens, dixit patri suo:

Based on a comparison of the English versions with the Greek version and the Vulgate, we may conclude that the OE, Wycliffe, Bishops’, Rheims and AV versions followed the Vulgate, and that, on the other hand, the Tyndale, Great, Geneva and ASV followed the Greek version (the RSV and NE versions are modified).

(3)
OE: ..., and ic næfre þîn bebod ne forgýmde; and ne sealdest þū mē næfre ān ticcen
Wycliffe: ..., and I brake neuere thi commaundement, thou hast neuere 3ovun a kyd to me,...
Tyndale: ..., nether brake at eny tyme thy commaundment, and yet gavest thou me never so moche as a kyd...
Great: ..., nether brake at any tyme thy commandment, and yet gavest thou me never a kid,...
Geneva: ..., nether brake I at anie time thy commandement, and yet thou never gavest me a kid...
Bishops’: ..., neither brake I at any time thy commandement, and yet thou never gavest
Now take a look at the classic versions:

Greek: ... καὶ οὐδὲποτε ἐντολήν σου παρήλθον, καὶ ἐμοὶ οὐδὲποτε ἐδωκας ἔρμφου...

Vulgate: ..., et nunquam mandatum tuum praeterili, et nunquam dedisti mihi hoedum...

Notice that most of the English versions have the word ‘yet’ after the first sentence to join them smoothly. But that is not the case with the Rheims version, which is said to be based mainly on the Vulgate. And in this connection, the same is true of the OE and Wycliffe versions. This is exactly the same conclusion we reached in our discussion about (2).

III

Earlier in this paper we asked ourselves, “What factors are responsible for ‘a certain unevenness of manner’ in Luke XV, 25-32, if there is at all?” And we indicated three awkward sentences in which there seems to be a certain unevenness of manner. In making a historical survey of English biblical translation of the same material from the OE period to the twentieth century, using the major eleven versions, we came to the conclusion that we can trace the unevenness of manner (including the punctuation) back to the Greek version and the Vulgate, and that the main English versions are significantly different in their attitudes toward the tradition of biblical translation. In other words, the character of each version can be traceable to either the Greek version or the Vulgate.

How should the Bible be translated? Translation of the Bible is fraught with special problems, not only religious but linguistic. In addition to religious questions, there are questions of literary character. There are two different views on biblical translation; one is that the Bible should be rendered word for word (i.e. literal translation), and the other is that the translator should change the style of the original into the corresponding mode of expression in his own language (i.e. free or sense translation), because every language possesses a character of its own. In addition, language always changes. So it should be clear from the preceding discussion that there is a continuous reciprocity between the history of biblical translation and the history of language. The same is true for the tradition of English biblical translation.
The general impression about the style of the English versions is that the older the version is, the closer it is to the classic versions. It is hoped that this paper has given a fair insight into a linguistic aspect of the tradition of English biblical translation.

Note:
Consider the corresponding part of the French version and Luther’s one:

French: Son fils ainé était aux champs. Quand, à son retour, il approcha de la maison, il entendit de la musique et des danses.

German: Aber der älteste Sohn was auf dem Felde; and als er nahe zum Hause kam, hörte er das Gesänge und den Reigen;

Notice that, as far as this part goes, the French version is more like the original than Luther’s Bible is.

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