CHAPTER 7

Lexical Choice

This category of evaluation operates on the word level. It offers a description of how the translator worked when he chose renderings of individual words. Several aspects of the rendering of words will be analyzed in the three sections of this chapter: 1) consistency versus inconsistency in lexical choice, 2) ideological/theological interpretation, and 3) translation of unknown words.

Consistency versus Inconsistency in Lexical Choice

Emanuel Tov studies the degree to which translators tended to use preferred renderings throughout the whole translation unit for a given Hebrew word, element, root or construction in his category “internal consistency.” Tov’s category operates on the formal equivalence between the source text and the translation. This approach has, however, been debated and an alternative approach has emerged focusing on semantic accordance.

Formal equivalence. Tov’s category has roots in James Barr’s paper on literalism in ancient translations. Barr has a category called “Consistency or non-consistency in the rendering, i.e. the degree to which a particular versional term is used for all (or most) cases of a particular term of the original.” Barr’s idea is that when the translator tended to choose the same Greek rendering of one Hebrew word it is a sign of literalness. The translator who varied his rendering of one and the same Hebrew word was demonstrating freedom in translation. Tov concentrates on the first aspect: “Many translators rendered all occurrences of a given word, element (e.g. preposition), root or construction as far as possible by the same Greek equivalent, often disregarding the effect of this type of translation upon its quality.” Tov calls this mode of translation “stereotyping.” He describes it as a tradition rather than a system and suggests that it reflects an ambition on the translators’ part to be faithful to the source text. However, Tov does not define a “stereotype” in terms of how

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1 Tov, Text-Critical Use, 20.
2 Barr, “Typology of Literalism,” 305.
frequently it was used, but suggests that a further designation of a rendering as “stereotyped” should be based upon the statistical analysis of its distribution in the LXX/OG.

The approach to lexical consistency by means of formal equivalence does not cover the semantics of the texts it compares. It simply notes the equivalents on a superficial level. It notes how many times the word X is used as the translation of the word Y in a certain translation unit. It does not make any judgments concerning the quality of the translation. The scholars working with formal equivalency then categorize their findings in order to make them comparable entities. The two common categories are stereotyped versus non-stereotyped translations.

Two minor criticisms of this approach regard 1) the selection of words to be studied, and 2) the interpretation of the results.

1) Each word has a field/range of referents which differs from word to word. Some words have many possible referents, others only a few. It follows that the translations of different terms should not be judged by the same standards. Consider, for example, the terms אב and שָׁאָל. The referents of the latter may vary, and a suitable Greek translation depends very much on the context in which the Hebrew word occurs. The former is more specific and thus the translator has fewer options how to translate it. Therefore, the fact that a translator frequently rendered אב with the same Greek word does not reveal very much about his approach to the text.

4 Sollamo (Semiprepositions, 13) operates with the notion that a word used as the translation for more than 50% of one Hebrew word may be called a “stereotyped translation.” Benjamin G. Wright uses three groups in his study of the Hebrew text of Sirach. He has one group of renderings where the Greek word covers at least 75% of the occurrences of the Hebrew word, one group with 66%, and one with 60% (Wright, No Small Difference). A third scholar, Galen Marquis, has a different approach and suggests that the designation “stereotype” may be used to words occurring more than once as the translation (Marquis, “Consistency”).

5 Tov, Text-Critical Use, 22.

6 See for instance Tov and Wright, “Computer-Assisted Study.”


8 For a short survey of some criticism of this approach, see Glenny, Finding Meaning, 38.