It is inconceivable that the language of the Bible should not have been subject to sociolinguistic constraints, because it is virtually impossible to use language at any time totally free from socio-cultural factors. The act of using language, just as not using language at all, is itself a cultural act.

Cultural meaning of one kind or another is mediated through language, as in the selection of one genre of discourse as opposed to another in a particular context, or in choices permitted by the language, as in some words instead of others, or as required obligatorily by the language, as with grammatically signalled categories of socially-situated differences (like 'deferential language').

The variety of genres of discourse in the Bible is itself sociolinguistic evidence of one kind. That these religious texts were allowed to remain (some might say, put) in the form of narrative, conversation, poetry, song, and so forth, as well as reveal various moods such as irony and sarcasm instead of being submitted to an editing process that would have transformed them all into a single genre reveals something about the societies that served as 'cultures' (using a biological metaphor) for Christianity. (Some might want to maintain that at least some texts in the process of this editing were 'rewritten' from one genre to another.)

All translators of the Bible have had to negotiate at least two sociolinguistic universes, that of the texts themselves and that of the recipient society. It is much more likely, however, that there are three such universes, the third and dominant one being that of the translator. It is dominant, I think, because it is perforce the one in which the translator is more at home—that is to say, most competent. What he knows about the Biblical languages and cultures as well as that of the people for whom he is translating, if they be other than his own, is acquired knowledge, never, or rarely ever, learned as well.

Examples of the foregoing are easy to find. The use of a familiar second person singular pronoun as opposed to a respectful or formal one (as with French tu and vous) with Jesus in the Gospels or with God, or vice versa (respectful with deity), as translators in Africa have found, is one such sociolinguistic choice. Indigenous Australian languages, as do some others, require that older and younger siblings be distinguished. In the Gospels this obligates the translator having to assign age differences to Apostles John and James.
Choices such as these, whether obligatory or optional, are salient in the recipient society. They force the translator to be sociolinguistically selective, and, we would hope, sensitive and intelligent. They alert him to the possibility that there might be other constraints less obvious. They embark him on research that will involve, for example, the collection and analysis of texts, the observation of language in use, and the interviewing of skillful language users in the society.

A more difficult task is to make oneself more competent in the sociolinguistic 'reading' of the Scriptures. ('reading') is in quotation marks because of its deliberate ambivalence in meaning—here implying a kind of exegesis rarely if ever taught in Biblical philology, that is, 'sociolinguistic exegesis.') A bibliography on this topic would not be put together too easily; it would include works of the genre illustrated by Caird 1980. But these are only Bible-specific books dealing with topics that are inherent in the study of all literature, hence all stylistics. Greater awareness of 'creativity' in all forms of verbal art involves, although it is not specific to, sociolinguistic awareness. Turner 1973 illustrates this relationship.

Literary studies provide the translator with a framework—both conceptual and terminological. But linguistics suggests that he can start with form. Here is one example.

In reading Matthew 25.31-46 one day I was struck by the fact that when the words of the Son of Man are repeated by the two groups of people whom he judges as King, those on his right hand and those on his left, they are syntactically different. The first repeat his words in full but the second in abbreviated form: "'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?...'"..."'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and would not help you?"" The contrast is striking. There is no linguistic motivation for this difference, and I do not feel that it is purely 'stylistic,' for example, abbreviating to avoid repetition. No, I interpret the second manner of speaking as being insolent, 'cheeky,' or the like. I find parallels to this in other forms of literature and in other societies where casual or intimate speech, as opposed to a very formal or 'frozen' style, for example, are brief syntactically and, in speech, phonologically. (In our society the latter is reflected in writing in the use of contractions. Notice, for example, the variable use of contractions in speech directed to Archbishop Thomas Becket in T. S. Eliot's Murder in the cathedral.)
It was the form that attracted my attention, but form in contrast. What I noticed was that the second utterance was different from the first. The observation was purely textual—simply the result of paying attention to the text. But there was also an extra-textual factor: I brought to my reading knowledge gained elsewhere.

It was purely by accident that I came to make the observation about this text. That is, it was an accident in time—in the chronology of my personal experience. Otherwise, it was not an accident. The observation occurred because I was reading in Portuguese. Reading fluently but deliberately, with attention being given to the language itself, in addition to meaning, I was almost bound to notice something. In any case, there is little denying the value of new perspectives in imaginative reading.

From discovery to translation—that is another task for the translator or Biblical scholar or preacher. If he finds social meaning in any text, how is he to render it? The solution, of course, is not to ignore it! That would be to reduce the potential meaning of Scripture. Linguistically, the translator must start with the text itself. Each genre, for example, has its own constraints. What is possible in conversation is not necessarily possible in prayer or even narrative. In African languages it might be inappropriate to use ideophones in translating certain parts of the Bible, but the narrative of David and Goliath seems to require them.

The canons of some translators require them to produce a language that is stylistically 'flat' and uniform. (Consistent with this tradition is a public reading of Scripture that is unvarying in style—that is, not characterized by elocutionary interpretation.) This position, however, is not determined by the Scriptures themselves. It is a cultural one brought to them. Such translators, or public readers of the Bible, are led to their practice, as are readers in a Christian Science church service, by a particular view of what the Bible is and how it is to be used. But what they believe is itself a product of social history. New perspectives for translation can be gained from sociolinguistics. The highest standards of translation require it.

References


*To appear in* Notes on Linguistics in 1981 (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 7500 West Camp Wisdom Road, Dallas, TX 75236, USA). Regarding this essay write to William J. Samarin, 24 Chudleigh Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4R 1M2.