

Ever since the Tower of Babel, people have had great difficulty understanding each other's languages. And while there has always been someone around who knew more than one language, knowing how to speak two languages is not the same thing as knowing how to translate. Translation is a special skill that professionals work hard to develop.

The importance of good translation is most obvious when things go wrong. Here are a few examples:

- 1) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with a red button that said "Reset" in English and "Peregruzka" in Russian; however, "peregruzka" actually means 'overcharged.'
- 2) When President Carter traveled to Poland in 1977, the State Department hired a Russian interpreter who knew Polish, but was not used to interpreting professionally in that language. Through the interpreter, Carter ended up saying things in Polish like "when I abandoned the United States" (for "when I left the United States") and "your lusts for the future" (for "your desires for the future"), mistakes that the media in both countries very much enjoyed.
- 3) A t-shirt manufacturer in Miami printed shirts in Spanish to commemorate the Pope's visit. By referring to the Pontiff as "la papa" instead of "el Papa", their shirts read: "I saw the potato."
- 4) Scandinavian vacuum manufacturer Electrolux once launched an American ad campaign by proclaiming, "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux."
- 5) In 1987, Colonel Sanders set up his first mainland China KFC outlet. Their famous "finger-lickin' good" was set into Chinese characters that meant "eat your fingers off." That was quickly changed and today there are over 900 KFC restaurants in China.

Why do such mistakes take place? There are unique problems that crop up when seeking to translate; etymology, internal structure, cognates and metaphors.

1) Etymology

The English words "ballot" and "bullet" share an ancient source, but they mean completely different things. Likewise, "grammar" and "glamour" used to be the same word, but most students don't find grammar to be glamorous. These pairs are examples of how etymology is misleading.

2) Internal Structure

Knowing what an office is does not shed light on what an officer does, even though "officer" has the word "office" in it, just as sweetbread is not sweet and it's not bread. These words demonstrate the danger of relying on internal structure -- roots, prefixes, suffixes and so forth -- to discern a word's meaning. (Also, a "strip mall" isn't what some people might suspect. Nor is a "drive-through window")

3) Cognates (words related in origin -- but don't always mean the same thing)

There's a word "demand" in French and it confuses English speakers because it means "to ask," not "to demand." In Spanish, "embarazada," does not mean "embarrassed" but rather "pregnant." These kinds of related words (known as cognates) are common in various languages. It stands to reason that if the words are related they ought to mean the same thing, but it's often not true.

4) Metaphor

Shakespeare writes that "Juliet is the sun." But even though tanning comes from exposure to the sun, Shakespeare didn't mean that Juliet is that girl who emits UV rays. Obviously, he meant that she has some very specific and culturally defined qualities of the sun, such as beauty. This represents perhaps the trickiest flaw in modern translations: missing the important parts of metaphor and other symbolic language.

With the above said, let's move on to discussing 5 of the most well-known Biblical mistranslations.

1) Isaiah 7:14 -- the birth from a virgin

Christian Bibles translated this verse as '*Behold a virgin shall conceive*', as opposed to the Jewish translation of, '*Behold the woman is with child*'

How did this happen?

When the early Christians tried to promote their new religion, they found it to be a tough sell. Pagans had traditional beliefs and practices they weren't quick to give up. So, to accommodate some beliefs of the pagan world, the evangelists adopted a number of distortions of biblical belief (and texts) to superimpose pagan beliefs on the new religion of Christianity. One of these is that a virgin has become pregnant, not by a man, but of the "Holy Spirit," and she has given birth to the messiah. The belief in a messiah was adopted by the Christians from the Jews, but the Jews never believed, nor did our Torah teach, that the messiah would be born of a virgin and a manifestation of G-d.

Many pagan religions believed in the idea of the impregnation of virgins by gods resulting in the birth of heroes. Stories of divine humans sired by the gods are told in several myths and legends.

-- According to Greek and Roman legends, Zeus and Apollo sired many distinguished men.

-- Egypt produced the Hellenized cult of Isis with its adoration of the Mother and Child. With a simple change of names, Isis became mother Mary and Horus became the child Jesus.

The pagan concept of divine birth, a concept alien to Judaism, entered Christianity through the Greco-Roman mythology then current in the western world. Seeking to substantiate the Christian-pagan concoction, the early Christians searched the Jewish Scriptures for justification of their claim of a virgin birth -- and claimed to have found it in Isaiah 7:14 with a verse that supposedly read: "*..behold a virgin shall conceive..*"

Two problems exist, however, with this novel translation:

1) Context. The context of this passage has nothing to do with Jesus or a birth in later times. Isaiah is speaking about the time of King Achaz -- at least 600 years before the Common Era.

2) Mistranslation: The Hebrew word translated by Christians as 'virgin' is 'almah': The word *almah* means a young woman of a certain age, with no reference to her status as a virgin. The specific word in Hebrew for virgin is '*betulah*.' One would expect, therefore, that if Isaiah refers specifically to a virgin, the prophet would have used the technical term *betulah* so as to leave no doubt as to the significance of his words.

We find, then, that the early Christians mistranslated the word *almah* in an attempt to give credence to their spurious claim that the birth of Jesus was foretold in the Bible.

2) What's that on Moses' head?

Some Christian bibles translate Exodus 34:29 as: "And when Moses came down from the mount Sinai, he held the two tables of the testimony, and he knew not that his face was horned from the conversation of the Lord." However, the standard Jewish translation is, "...he knew not that his face was radiant from ..."

How did some translations come to state that Moses had horns?

St. Jerome, the patron saint of translators, studied Hebrew so he could translate the Old Testament into Latin from the original, instead of from the early Greek version that everyone else had used. The resulting Latin version (the 4th century Vulgate), which became the basis for hundreds of subsequent translations contained a famous mistake.

When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai his head has "radiance" or, in Hebrew, "karan." But Hebrew is written without the vowels, and St. Jerome had read "karan" as "keren," or "horned." From this error came centuries of paintings and sculptures of Moses with horns and the odd offensive stereotype of the horned Jew. The most famous offspring of this errant translation was Michelangelo's 16th century sculpture *Moses*, which depicted Moses with horns on his head.

Did Jerome make a simple mistake in translation?

Although some historians believe that Jerome made an outright error, others suggest that Jerome saw *karan* as a metaphor for 'glorified'. After all, we find English words such as crown and corona, perhaps derived from the original Hebrew *karan*. The Greek Septuagint, which Jerome also had available, translated the verse as "Moses knew not that the appearance of the skin of his face was glorified" -- so certainly that translation of *karan* was known to the translator of the Vulgate.

The understanding that the original Hebrew was difficult and was not likely to literally mean "horns" persisted into and through the Renaissance. However, starting in the 11th and 12th centuries, the social position of Jews, and their depictions in Christian art, became increasingly negative and reached a low point as the Middle Ages ended. Jews became identified with the devil and were commonly depicted in an evil light, with horns, a slanderous stereotype that exists to this day. Hence many people today interpret the horns on Michelangelo's statue only in a negative light, a situation that was not true in Michelangelo's day.

So ...how did Moses get horns? While it's clear that the Torah never intended to talk about antlers, there was either a mistake made in etymology (*karan* vs *keren*), or a metaphor gone wild.

3) Don't kill ...or Don't murder? Exodus 20:13

How many times have you heard the sixth commandment translated as 'Don't Kill'?

In February 2013, the *Washington Post* published an opinion piece by a Marine captain titled, "I Killed People in Afghanistan. Was I Right or Wrong?" The essence of Mr. Kudo's piece is that before he served in Afghanistan he was ethically unprepared for killing, that killing is always wrong, and that war is therefore always wrong. He wrote, "I held two seemingly contradictory beliefs: Killing is always wrong, but in war, it is necessary. How could something be both immoral and necessary?"

The statement, "killing is always wrong," is the core of the captain's moral confusion. Many are unable to reconcile such actions -- even in war -- since they translate the 6th biblical commandment as 'Thou shalt not kill.'

Addressing Israel's leaders from a public rally in Turkey following the deadly 2010 Flotilla raid, Prime Minister Erdoğan said in both Turkish and English: "You shall not kill." Then he showed his linguistic capabilities and further chastised Israeli leaders: "You still don't get it? Then I shall speak to you in your own language: Lo tir'tsach!"

The common misunderstanding of the intent of the 6th commandment is based upon an erroneous translation. "Lo tir'tsach" is translated as 'Don't murder', not 'Don't kill.' The Torah's imperative is against unlawful killing resulting in guilt. Jewish law and tradition allows for justified killing in the context of warfare, capital punishment, and self defense. Much as distinctions in taking a life exist in most national laws (first degree murder, second degree murder, voluntary homicide, involuntary homicide, etc), so too in Jewish law. Whereas the Hebrew word 'ratzach' always refers to 'murder', the words 'harag' and 'hay-meas' occur with legal forms of killing.

The key to properly understand the 6th commandment is an accurate translation: "Lo tir'tsach" means 'Don't murder' -- not, 'Don't Kill.'

4) An Eye for an Eye

The Torah states in its discussion of the laws of personal injury:

*"...And you shall award a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise."
(Exodus 21:24)*

In the book of Vayikra (Leviticus) the text is even clearer: *"And if a man shall inflict a wound upon his fellow, as he did so shall be done to him. A break for a break, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; as a man shall inflict a wound upon a person, so shall be inflicted upon him."* (24:19,20)

These verses seem clear that a direct measure-for-measure punishment is required; one who takes out the eye of another, his eye shall be put out.

However, the Oral Torah maintains that the Torah never intended to mandate physical punishment in personal injury cases. Instead, it says (in the Talmud) that the text actually authorizes *financial restitution*. The oft-quoted phrase “an eye for an eye,” for example, means that the perpetrator must pay the monetary value commensurate with the victim’s injury. All the other cases cited in these passages are to be understood similarly, in terms of financial compensation.

The gap between the literal and intended meaning of the verses is so great that the Rambam says: “All this is law given to Moshe in our hands, and thus did our ancestors rule in the court of Yehoshua and in the court of Shmuel from the Rama and in each and every court which has stood from the time of Moshe, our teacher, to this day.”

It is clear, then, that in an unbroken tradition (Oral Law) from the time of Revelation onward, that Torah law itself mandates financial restitution, not physical punishment, in cases of personal injury.

If so, why doesn’t the Torah simply say what it means?

While 'an eye for an eye' does not mean that we should physically injure the perpetrator, it seeks to convey the important moral teaching: *the perpetrator is deserving of losing his limb and must therefore pay financial restitution*.

We see, then, a deeply nuanced approach to cases of personal injury: The perpetrator truly merits physical loss of limb in return for the damage inflicted upon his victim. Torah law, however, will not consider physical mutilation as a possible punishment for a crime. The penalty must therefore be commuted into financial terms. Had the Torah, however, mandated financial payment from the outset, the full gravity of the crime would not have been conveyed. The event would have been consigned to the realm of *dinei mamonot* (monetary crimes), and the precious nature of human life and limb would have been diminished.

Other reasons make it clear that 'eye for an eye' can not be taken literally:

-- Perhaps in punishing the perpetrator he will become blind and die, with the result that he will have paid an eye AND a nefesh (soul) -- a punishment beyond measure-for-measure.

-- Perhaps the perpetrator is a Kohen. In being blinded, he will also become pasul (disqualified to serve as a Kohen), resulting in a punishment beyond measure-for-measure.

One final thought: The Hebrew from which 'eye for an eye' is translated is 'ayin tachas ayin'

The Vilna Gaon said that if you take the letters 'under' ('following', the literal translation of 'under') ayin (eye), gives the following: Ayin - peh yud - chaf nun - samech. Together, those three spell 'kesef' - money ...an allusion to monetary compensation.

5) Was the Forbidden Fruit Really an Apple?

While there are various opinions in Jewish literature as to the identity of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, it most certainly was not an apple.

The Torah obscures the identity of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, lest people constantly point and say, "That is the species of fruit that brought death unto the world." Nevertheless, the sages offer various opinions based on clues found in the Torah.

- Wheat: Wheat represents knowledge, as a child is considered to have attained a certain level of intellectual maturity and begins to speak once he or she has tasted wheat.

-- Grapes or wine: There is no fruit that can cause as much misery as the grape and its wine

-- Fig: The fig provided clothing for Adam and Eve; some commentators suggest there may be a connection --"By that with which they were made low, they rectified."

-- Esrog: The verse states that "the woman saw that the tree was good to eat." This implies that not only did the fruit of the tree have a good taste, but the wood of the tree itself had a good taste. This is true only with regards to the *esrog* tree.

So what is the origin, then, of the idea that the forbidden fruit was an apple? Early Christian scholars often took the forbidden fruit to be an apple, possibly because of the irresistible pun suggested by the Latin *malum*, which means both "apple" and "evil." At least one early Latin translation of the bible uses "apple" instead of "fruit." A contributing factor no doubt was that apples were a lot more popular in Europe than in the Middle East, where it's generally too hot for them to thrive. Additionally, the apple has a lot to recommend it: red (blood) or golden (greed), round (fertility) and sweet-tasting (desire).

In conclusion, the consequences of an errant translation can not only be serious, but life-changing -- as the following story indicates:

A new monk arrives at the monastery. He is assigned to help the other monks in copying the old texts by hand. He notices, however, that they are copying copies, and not the original books.

So, the new monk goes to the head monk to ask him about this. He points out that if there was an error in the first copy, that error would be continued in all of the other copies. The head monk says, "We have been copying from the copies for centuries, but you make a good point, my son."

So, he goes down into the cellar with one of the copies to check it against the original. Hours later, nobody has seen him. So, one of the monks goes downstairs to look for him. He hears sobbing coming from the back of the cellar and finds the old monk leaning over one of the original books crying. He asks what's wrong.

"The word is *celebrate*, not *celibate*!" says the old monk with tears in his eyes.