We Still Don't Get It

Evangelicals and Bible Translation Fifty Years After James Barr

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Fifty years is a long time: although considerably shorter now that my wife, Jenny, and I are within a decade of our own 50th anniversary. Still: fifty years of the NIV is certainly cause for celebration. While I was not involved in the translation project until fairly late — I joined CBT in 1996 — my familiarity with the translation does go back a long way. In my second year of seminary at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1973, I purchased a new English translation of the New Testament: a hard-cover volume with the words “Holy Bible: New International Version” on the cover. Some of you will remember that NT NIV; and some of you will also remember the landscape of English translation in those days. Many evangelicals were still using the King James Version — as was my fiancée Jenny and her family. The Revised Standard Version, dominant in the mainline church, was treated with grave suspicion by evangelicals. (Another personal anecdote: asking for the *New Bible Commentary* in a Christian bookstore in Chicago to purchase as a Christmas gift for my brother-in-law in 1973, I was told by the clerk, in a rather superior voice, “We don’t stock that commentary because it is based on the RSV, which translates ‘expiation’ in Rom. 3:25.”) The New American Standard Bible, released in 1971, was beginning to attract attention — especially among students of Hebrew and Greek — but its stilted English kept it from being broadly read. At the other end of the spectrum was Ken Taylor’s *Living Bible*. Many evangelicals welcomed its fresh readings, but its explicit claim to be a “paraphrase” put it out of consideration as a basic Bible for most.

So, to put it provocatively, evangelicals were faced with the choice of a Bible that was either antiquated, heretical, unreadable, or unreliable.[1] Matters were even worse two decades earlier, when Howard Long, a Christian businessman, was trying to find a Bible to put into the hands of friends he wanted to introduce to the faith. He expressed his frustration to his pastor, who in turn formally requested his denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, to look into the possibility of a new translation of

1. Of course, other English Bibles were available; deserving of mention especially are the Modern Language Bible (1959; formerly the New Berkeley Version), Good News for Modern Man (NT in 1966); the Jerusalem Bible (1966), and the New English Bible (1970). None, however, was widely used among evangelicals.

the Bible. From the beginning, the concern was to involve the broader evangelical world in this enterprise, and so the National Association of Evangelicals got involved. The climax of this process came in 1964 and 1965. In December of 1964 a joint committee of representatives from the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals met in Nyack, New York, and issued invitations to a translation conference. That conference met in August, 1965, at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois. Two key decisions were made. The first was that "a contemporary English translation of the Bible should be undertaken as a collegiate endeavor of evangelical scholars." The second was that a "continuing committee of fifteen" should be established to move the work forward. The "committee of fifteen" was ultimately named the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) while the "contemporary English translation" became the NIV.

The critical decisions that were to launch and shape the NIV were therefore made in 1964–1965. Of course, the full NIV Bible did not appear until 1978; but, as those of us who write know, publication dates are the end, not the beginning of the work. And so it is appropriate that we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the NIV in 2014 and 2015.

Reasons to celebrate are many. Among them is one that resonates especially clearly with our current setting in the Evangelical Theological Society: the broadly evangelical nature of the NIV. I note again a certain convergence with my own experience. When I was converted as a college student in 1971, I determined to figure out this new faith I had embraced. The first Christian authors I read, such as C.S. Lewis and John Stott, presented a compelling and exciting vision of what Stott liked to call "basic balanced Christianity" — "BBC" for short. My education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School reinforced my inclination to "mere Christianity." Like Paul in Romans 7, I recount my experience because it was typical. These were the years many young people were converted to a form of "basic Christianity" and when the word "evangelical" was finding its place on our cultural map, as George Gallup, Jr., recognized when he labeled 1976 "the year of the evangelical" (1976). The beginnings of this evangelical movement gave birth to the NIV and the NIV, in turn, helped to solidify and expand the movement. From the beginning, the NIV was conceived as a broadly evangelical project. The 32 scholars who attended the founding conference in 1965 represented 28 different colleges and seminaries and a broad spectrum of denominations, including Baptist, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Lutheran, Nazarene, Methodist, and, of course, Christian Reformed. This inclusiveness has been maintained as the membership of CBT has changed over the years. At a time when the evangelical movement seems all too easily to march in step with the sharp partisan divides in our politics, the vision of the NIV — a Bible produced by a broad spectrum of evangelical scholarship and designed for all evangelicals — is one worth recapturing and perpetuating.

The NIV carries the DNA of another hallmark of the evangelical movement five decades ago: the growing academic sophistication of evangelical biblical scholars. One area of particular significance for the NIV and, of course, all Bible translations is linguistics. James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* served as a key initial conduit from modern linguistics research to biblical studies. Barr's book was published in 1961 and so, with a little arithmetic liberty, we may celebrate the golden anniversary of a new sophistication in biblical linguistics along with the 50th anniversary of the NIV. It is the confluence of these two that will be the focus of this paper. While the 1960s-era documents that set the parameters of the new translation we call the NIV make no explicit reference to modern linguistic theory, their translation guidelines clearly betray the influence of this movement. In God's providence, the NIV was conceived at just the time when those principles were being brought into the realm of biblical studies. Of course, translations both before and after the NIV are also built on the foundation of these linguistic principles. Indeed, they have been communicated to decades of students in our basic exegesis classes. The problem, however, is that we have not consistently honored these insights in discourse about translation. In 2011, Stanley Porter claimed that " … Barr's insights are still, I believe, widely ignored in much language-related biblical research."[2] I would extend his criticism to translation. Specifically, I highlight three basic and generally agreed-upon linguistic principles that have too often been ignored in modern Bible translation. First, linguistics is not a prescriptive but a descriptive enterprise; second, meaning resides not at the level of individual words but at the level of collocations of words in clauses, sentences,

2. Stanley E. Porter, "Greek Linguistics and Lexicography," in *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century. Essays in Honor of D. A. Carson on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 19.

and ultimately discourses; and third, the meaning of individual words is expressed not in a single word gloss but in a semantic field.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass,* Humpty Dumpty proclaims, "When I use a word … it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less." Ah, if only it were so! If I were the English language dictator, I would decree that we resurrect the second-person number distinctions from the Elizabethan period, bring the archaic word "unto" back into circulation so that I could more effectively translate the Greek preposition *eis*, and create a gender-neutral third-person pronoun that could refer to human beings. Unfortunately — or fortunately, depending on your perspective — language does not work like that. No one person or committee of persons prescribes what words will mean or how they will be used in combination. The users of a language determine meaning and usage. Linguists study a given language at a certain point in time with the hope of describing just what is going on. As John Lyons puts it in his standard book on modern linguistics: "The linguist's first task is to *describe* the way people actually speak (or write) their language, not to *prescribe* how they ought to speak or write."[3] Rules of usage are simply generalized summaries of usage that never apply to all users of the language and that change over time. We who work in the biblical languages know this well. HALOT, BDAG, Waltke-O'Connor, and Dan Wallace describe what is going on in biblical Hebrew and Greek. And when we want to go further, we access resources such as the TLG database to provide us with a window into the way the broad spectrum of speakers and writers actually use their language.

Translators, of course, make use of just these tools, trying their best to understand what, for instance, the prophet Isaiah might have meant by *almah* in the eighth-century BC or what the combination *pistis Iesou Christou* could have meant for Paul the apostle in the first century AD. But it is insufficiently appreciated how important the descriptive principle in modern linguistics is for the other side of the translators' task: putting the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew into English.

Translators must work with the language as it is; wishing it were otherwise is vain, and forcing into our translations English meanings and constructions that are no longer current is a betrayal of our mis-

3. John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: University Press, 1968), 43.

sion. Humpty Dumpty may choose to invest words with whatever meaning he chooses. But translators who try to impose a meaning on an English word that it no longer has in common speech run the risk of failing to communicate with the audience. We who translate the Bible run a particular risk here. We are so immersed in the forms of the biblical languages that we can forget that those forms may not, in fact, be good English. I doubt that CBT coined the word, but we often warn ourselves about the danger of translating not into English but into "biblisch": that is, a form of English so indebted to biblical idiom that it sounds unnatural in the ears of the typical modern speaker of English. "Daughter of Zion" is a good example. People familiar with the Bible can probably unpack the phrase accurately enough; but the average English-speaker would surely be wondering who the offspring of the city of Zion might be.

Of course we touch here on the vital question of target audience: for whom are we translating? Every translation has to work with a very clear answer to this question. I don't want to suggest that there is only one right answer: there is a place for translations directed to different audiences. From the beginning, however, the NIV has had as its target the general English-speaking population, the "International" in its title reflecting this concern. For us, two implications flow from this focus. First, our translation choices must reckon with our audience's ability to understand English. I tell you nothing you don't already know when I say that fewer and fewer American adults can read effectively. A 2013 study concluded that 35 percent of adults in the US can't read at all or read below a fifth grade level. Even college-educated and fully acculturated adults, who spend their time on Facebook and Candy Crush rather than reading books, have difficulty handling English at any level of complexity. Growing illiteracy poses a significant but sometimes underappreciated problem for translators — and, I might add, for a movement such as ours that is bound up with the accurate interpretation and effective application of a text. Of course, balance is needed here. Richard Hays has recently complained about the way the CEB loses the stylistic elegance and even theological meaning of Romans by, for instance, translating Rom. 16:13, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord" in the NIV, as "Say hello to Rufus, who is an outstanding believer." Hays comments, " … to turn a magisterial theological reflection such as Romans into an easy-reading text for the average American seventh-grader entails certain modifications, tradeoffs, and sacrifices."[4] My response: "Yes … but." After all, any translation from one language to another entails "modifications, tradeoffs, and sacrifices"; and if, as surveys reveal, the average American is reading at a seventh to eighth grade level, translations cannot necessarily be faulted for trying to hit that target. We sometimes hear it said that English translations will inevitably contain difficult texts, and that we shouldn't worry too much about these because it is the ministry of the teacher in the church to make clear the meaning. Again, I don't entirely disagree. But I wonder how many people reading the Bible have access to a good teacher. Some expressions of this principle sound worryingly like the medieval claim that a Latin Bible few people could read was no problem because it was the job of the priest to explain it. Again, let me say clearly: both sides in this argument make valid points. Every translation committee struggles to keep in balance the sometimes esoteric details of the text with the need to communicate clearly to modern English readers, with the translations leaning to one side or the other. My point is simply that our discourse about translation sometimes fails sufficiently to take into account the target audience. Bruce Metzger, who was a key figure in the translation of the RSV and NRSV, stated this well-known translation maxim: "As literal as possible, as free as necessary."[5] The maxim is perhaps OK as far as it goes, but it begs the crucial practical question: "necessary" to accomplish what? English that college professors find elegant? English that fifth-graders can read with ease? Or, as in the case of the NIV, English that new converts can understand and that preachers can use as a solid platform for biblical exposition?

I have stressed that the descriptive approach of modern linguistics requires that translators know their target audience. Our ability to understand the language of our target audience has been significantly enhanced by the rapid advance in computing power. The field of "computational linguistics" harnesses the power of computers to provide broadly applicable and current data about the state of the language. To my knowledge, the NIV was the first translation to take signifi-

4. Richard Hays, "Lost in Translation: A Reflection on Romans in the Common English Bible," in *The Unrelenting God: God's Action in Scripture. Essays in Honor of Beverly Roberts Gaventa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 83–101 (84). Similar is Robert Gundry's criticism of N.T. Wright's translation; see http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2012/mayjun/tomstargum.html?paging=off.

5. The words are found in the NRSV "To the Reader."

cant advantage of this powerful resource. The problem we face on the CBT, as do all translation committees, is to choose the right English word or phrase to communicate the meaning that we have decided is borne by a particular Greek or Hebrew word or phrase. As broadly representative as CBT is, each of us speaks our own special form of English: our own idiolect, the product of our place of origin, our education, and our customary discourse. I recall a discussion years ago on CBT about the relative merits of translating "desert" or "wilderness." Ken Barker insisted we could not use "wilderness" because the word necessarily connoted an area that was heavily forested. Some of us looked quizzically at Ken until we remembered that he was born and raised in southeastern Kentucky. Standard resources such as dictionaries can help here, but they often don't answer the particular questions we translators are asking and they are usually out of date.

Enter computational linguistics. Much as NT scholars ransack the TLG database to figure out the sense of ancient Greek words, translators can now access huge databases of modern English to better understand the current meaning and usage of key words. Knowing that the decisions we would make about translating biblical gender forms into English would be critical, CBT commissioned Collins Dictionaries to pose some key questions to its database of English — the largest in the world, with over 4.4 billion words, gathered from several English-speaking countries and including both spoken and written English. We CBT members had our own ideas about whether, for instance, "man" was still good English for the human race or whether "he" still carried clear generic significance. But we did not agree on every point; and standard resources gave conflicting opinions. So we asked the Collins computational linguists to query their database on these points and others. The results revealed that the most popular words to describe the human race in modern U.S. English were "humanity," "man," and "mankind." CBT then used this data in the updated NIV, choosing from among these three words (and occasionally others also) depending on the context. We also asked the Collins experts to determine which singular pronouns referring to human beings were most often used in a variety of constructions. Consider, for example, Mark 8:36a, which reads in the KJV "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" The Gk., using *anthrôpos* clearly refers to a human being without regard to gender. How to say that in modern English? Moving to plural forms is one option, as does the CEB. Shifting to the second person, whose pronouns are not gender specific is another: the NLT goes this route. Another option is to retain the words "man," "he," and "his" of the KJV, as do the ESV and HCSB. But do these words continue to function as true generics in modern English? On CBT, we did not think they did. We were pretty sure that "man" no longer had a true generic sense, a conclusion borne out by modern style guides and indirectly attested by other modern translations: the ESV, for instance, replaces hundreds of occurrences of "man" in the RSV with other locutions. But we were uncertain about the pronoun to use as the follow-up. We also wanted to see if there might be some way to retain the third-person singular form of the original. In brief, we needed data about the current state of English pronouns to guide our translation decisions. And so we requested the Collins linguists to search their database to determine what pronouns were being used in modern English to refer back to indefinite pronouns (such as "each," "one," and "someone") and to non-gender specific nouns (such as "person"). They constructed what they call an "anaphora resolution grammar" to resolve the matter. To return to Mark 8:36, then, CBT tentatively decided to render *anthrôpos* as "someone." The Collins data revealed that over 90% of English speakers and writers were using plural or neutral pronouns to refer back to "someone": mainly the pronoun "they." Based on these data, then, CBT translated Mark 8:36 as "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" Now at this point some of you are hearing the voice of your seventh-grade English teacher, insisting that one cannot use an apparently plural pronoun such as "their" to refer to the singular pronoun "someone." But here is where we need to invoke again the fundamental linguistic principle of descriptiveness. What determines "correct" English is not some nineteenth or twentieth-century style manual or the English we were taught in grade school but the English that people are actually speaking and writing today. And the data are very clear: modern English has latched on to the so-called "singular they," which has been part of English for a long time, as the preferred way to follow up generic nouns and pronouns.

The Collins report, which you can find online at CBT-NIV.org, is simply an example of the kind of data translators can now access in order to accomplish the objective of using natural contemporary

English in their renderings.[6] Of course, as with all data, interpretation is needed. For instance, the Collins report revealed that evangelicals are using "man" to refer to the human race far more often than the general population. Was this perhaps because much of the evangelical English in the database consisted of sermons, which were based on existing translations that used "man" in this way? And, if these data were accurate, what decisions should follow? Should translators bias their English toward the evangelical sub-culture, recognizing that it forms a substantial part of the audience? Or should translators use general English to make sure the Bible communicates well to everyone? Decisions are still needed: but it is always preferable to base decisions on solid data. Computational linguistics holds the promise of providing translators with a wealth of such data.

I turn to a second major principle of modern linguistics: meaning is found not in individual words, as vital as they are, but in larger clusters: phrases, clauses, sentences, discourses. To be sure, there is a lively debate among linguists over the degree to which individual words carry meaning. But there is general agreement over the basic principle that words in themselves are not the final arbiters of meaning; linguists speak of "lexical ambiguity."[7]

We take this principle for granted in our study of the biblical languages, insisting on the importance of syntagmatic relationships in our word studies. The object I put after the verb *ginôskô* dramatically affects its sense: "knowing" that Jesus is God is very different from "knowing" God or from God's "knowing" me. Once again, however, the principle is too easily ignored when translations are being evaluated. Translation is not, as many people think, a matter of word substitution: English word x in place of Hebrew word y. Translators must first determine the meaning that the clustering of words in the biblical languages convey and then select a collocation of English words that accurately communicates that meaning to modern listeners and readers. All translations work this way — as they must to be considered translations at all. But they differ, of course, on the value that is placed

6. "The Development and Use of Gender Language in Contemporary English—A Corpus Linguistic Analysis." Alan Cruse notes some limitations in the use of these kinds of "corpus linguistic" studies, but none of his strictures apply to the Collins report (*Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* [3rd ed; Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 216–17).

7. Cruse, *Meaning in Language*, 100.

on retaining the form found in the originals. I would argue that the key tension here is not form vs. meaning but, in practice, form vs. natural English. From the beginning, the NIV has taken a mediating position on this issue. The manual produced when the translation that became the NIV was first being planned states: "If the Greek or Hebrew syntax has a good parallel in modern English, it should be used. But if there is no good parallel, the English syntax appropriate to the meaning of the original is to be chosen." It is fine, in other words, to carry over the form of the biblical languages into English — but never at the expense of natural expression. In this, CBT follows in the footsteps of Luther, who said of his own German translation: " … what is the point of needlessly adhering so scrupulously and stubbornly to words which one cannot understand anyway? Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather he must see to it — once he understands the Hebrew author — that he concentrates on the sense of the text, asking himself, 'Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation?' Once he has the German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows."[8]

The principle that meaning resides in larger clusters of words means that we should no longer talk in terms of "word-for-word" as a translation value. To suggest in our discussion of translations among a general audience that "word-for-word" is a virtue is to mislead people about the nature of language and translation. At the same time, the fact that translations transfer meaning, not words, makes clear that it is foolish to claim that the doctrine of inspiration entails a "word-for-word" translation approach. Such a claim effectively removes the inspiration from those many words and forms that cannot be carried over — try producing a "word" equivalent of the preposition *eis* when it governs an infinitive! More importantly, it badly misunderstands the doctrine itself. Plenary inspiration claims that every word of the original text was inspired by God: and this is why CBT labors over every single word of the original texts, working hard to determine how each of those words contributes to *what* the text is saying. But what we translate are not those individual words but the meaning that they convey in their combination.

The third and final linguistic principle I want to invoke to elevate

8. LW 35:213–14.

our discourse about translation is at the heart of Barr's seminal work: the nature of lexical semantics. Again, I am saying nothing new or even, I think, controversial. Barr emphasized synchrony in determining meaning, he reminded us that words often have several distinct meanings, with its corollary warning about "illegitimate totality transfer," he insisted that both syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations had to be considered in defining words, and, above all, he stressed that words have a field of meaning. All these principles are taught and elaborated in our basic texts about exegetical method, such as Moises Silva's excellent *Biblical Words and Their Meanings*.[9] Many of us have taught them to our students year after year. And yet … We still write about and talk about the "literal" meaning of a word. To be sure, probably most modern linguists hold to some form of the view called monosemy: that is, that words have a basic sense of some kind. But this "basic" sense is often an abstract concept that cannot be expressed in a single English word or even phrase. Linguists note that "literal" itself has a range of meaning in the literature, denoting everything from the "original" meaning to "most usual" meaning to "logically basic" meaning.[10] None of these sheds much light on particular words in particular contexts. Thus, for instance, the "original" meaning of a word has little to do with its meaning in a given context. Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, made this point with the analogy of a game of chess: it might be theoretically interesting to trace the moves that led to the board before the players, but it is of little practical use in deciding what move they now need to make. Nor do the distinct "meanings" of words usually shed light on each other. The

9. Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983). See also Anthony C. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), 75–104; J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989); Eugene A. Nida and Johannes P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament* (SBL Resources for Biblical Studies 25; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992). Fundamental linguistic principles are also summarized in, e.g., Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2010 [reprint]); D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Dave Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013).

10. See, e.g., Cruse, *Meaning in Language*, 239–41.

"bank" that I put my money in has little to do with the "bank" to which my boat is heading; and to suggest that my use of "bank" in one sense carries the idea of "bank" in the other is patent nonsense.[11]

We know this, we teach this: but our practice often falls short. As I was editing contributions to a new *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, I was dismayed to run across again and again, from very fine established scholars, notes that cited an NIV translation and then indicated, as an indirect criticism of the NIV, the "literal" meaning of the word being translated. I was humbled to discover in preparing this paper that I make a similar comment 24 times in my NICNT Romans commentary. For instance, in commenting on Rom. 15:26, where the NIV refers to the collection for the saints in Jerusalem as a "contribution," I have a note that reads "literally, a fellowship." Such notes seem to be communicating to readers one of two things. First, the note might be implying that the NIV is somehow at fault for taking a liberty with the original languages, choosing an English word that is not "literally" what the Greek says. Or, second, the note may be suggesting that the English word the NIV has chosen, while accurate enough, should be seen as also connoting the "literal" meaning of the Greek word. Each of these alleged faults could, indeed, be genuine problems. As good as the NIV is, I am sure there are places where an English word does not accurately convey the sense of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word. And, of course, a particular word can be intended to convey more than one sense. But in neither case is the issue one of being "literal."

To claim that a word in the biblical languages has a "literal" meaning, capable of being summarized in a single English equivalent, is simply not true. Words occupy a spectrum of meaning, and the range of meaning of particular Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words is never quite the same as the range of meaning of any particular English word. And so, for example, we sometimes translate *peirazô* "test" and at other times "tempt." Neither of these English words has a range of meaning that corresponds with the Greek word; and it is manifestly foolish to claim that either English word captures the "literal" sense of the Greek word. We understand why the NIV uses eight different English expressions to translate a single Greek word, *sarx*, in a single

11. I leave to the side here whether "bank" in these two senses is one "word" or two—a matter of some debate among linguists (see, e.g., Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics,* 405–6).

NT book, Colossians (note, by the way, that the ESV is not far behind with five different expressions). To criticize these translation decisions as being "not literal" is linguistically nonsensical.

The use of "literal" to suggest that a given biblical word has additional senses is less pernicious. The comment from my NICNT commentary that I cited above falls into this category: I seem to be suggesting that the common sense of *koinônia*, "fellowship," somehow colors the meaning of the word in Rom. 15:26, even though the NIV and most other translations appropriately render it "contribution." To be sure, modern linguists are skeptical about "double" meanings, generally insisting that one should give a particular word the least meaning necessary to explain it in its context. Yet this sensible guideline does not exclude the possibility — probably fairly rare — that an author may use a word with a double meaning or create a deliberate "overlap" in its meanings. Paul may suggest that the contribution he seeks from the Roman Christians is an expression of their fellowship with other brothers and sisters. However, even if that were the case, it is inaccurate to suggest that "literalness" has anything to do with it. Labeling this "literal" suggests to the uninformed reader that particular occurrences of words generally maintain some degree of reference to a single root meaning. This is the "root fallacy" that Barr described.

If these observations about lexical semantics are so well known, why do we still find ourselves speaking and writing about the "literal" meaning of words? I can think of three reasons. First is what I call "homiletical expediency"; Barr, more bluntly, spoke of an "opportunistic homiletical trick."[12] The desire to show off our knowledge of the original languages and make a simple and useful point can lead us to say quite foolish things about words and their meanings. Citing examples is fun and amusing, but I will decline the opportunity. You have heard plenty of them. A second reason for using the word "literal" in these ways is simplicity. It is far easier and more economical for me to describe *koinônia* as "literally, fellowship" than to say "a word with a range of meaning having to do with an association of some kind, whether of people or things." Third, we fall into speaking of words in this way because it is the way we were taught — and the way we continue to teach. In beginning language study, certainly, the "gloss" approach to lexicography rules: the provision of a single

12. *Semantics,* 113.

English word that implicitly is "the meaning" of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words. When I first studied Greek, I learned early on that our good friend *lyô* meant "loose." I would have had serious doubts about the value of what I was learning if I had realized that the NIV, for instance, translates this verb with a form of "loose" only three times in its 42 NT occurrences — and the ESV not much more often, with six. There are, of course, sound pragmatic reasons for memorizing "loose" as the meaning of *lyô*; or "give" as the meaning of *nâthan*. There will be plenty of time later on to learn that BDAG gives five major meanings for *lyô* and HALOT 16 for *nâthan* — that neither word has a clear "literal" sense that can neatly be summarized but that both words have a range of meaning. But here's the catch: does the student really learn that? Do they move beyond the "gloss" method to a more sophisticated understanding of words and their meanings? Or, to bring it home: do we effectively teach them the realities of language? Do we continue to require our second-year language students to translate "word for word," perpetuating a simplistic and ultimately quite false view of language?[13] It is no wonder that the discourse about translation so often rests on such linguistically naïve premises. They are just the premises that our teaching and our writing too often perpetuate.

I deliberately chose some bad examples from my own writing to soften the strong point I just made. The book I cite from was written before I joined CBT and had the opportunity to get to know translation "from the inside." Few of us have that opportunity. But all of us can try to put ourselves in the shoes of the translator, seeking to understand the issues truly involved in the context of an informed linguistic approach.

Should the Lord preserve us, when Jenny and I celebrate our 50th anniversary, it will be a time mainly to look back. That is not the case with the 50th anniversary we celebrate tonight. God willing, many more years of the NIV lie ahead, as CBT continues its work, refining the text in light of current scholarship and the changing shape of English. We ask you to pray for us as we do this work, so that the NIV would continue accurately to mediate the Word of God to fresh generations of English speakers all over the world.

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13. Moises Silva also comments on this problem: "Are Translators Traitors? Some Personal Reflections," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World. Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 38.