

# A Science of Translating Baha'i Sacred Scriptures: Lost or Gained in Translation?

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## A Summary

Japanese translations of the Baha'i Holy Writings are often said to be "difficult to read." If this is true, it is a serious problem because Sacred Verses are considered to be food for the soul and a source of divine inspiration. We do not wish the reader to be deprived of such bounties because of the translations. The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate the causes of this difficulty and suggest some solutions by exploring a science of translating.

In brief, the causes can be categorized into three: un-naturalness (or lack of fluency) of Japanese translations, unfamiliar concepts and terms in the original text, and use of kanjis. The last is not directly related to translating and therefore omitted from further discussions.

Un-natural Japanese is more or less a direct result of foreignization of text, that is, being faithful to the English and 'sending the reader abroad.' Because of the large difference between the English and the Japanese languages especially in terms of syntax, faithful translation often results in foreignization. Then one might argue that all we need to do is to domesticate the text, making translations sound perfectly natural as Japanese. The reality is, however, is not simple. Domestication, or idiomatic translation, often means changing, omitting or adding elements from/to the original text because no two languages are considered to be word-for-word reflection of each other. Although this is practiced to a certain degree, frequent practice of such a method could mean radical digression from the original. Then it is no longer 'translation' but adaptation or in the worst case text distortion. Therefore, ideal translation falls somewhere between faithful translation (foreignization) and idiomatic translation (domestication); these are sometimes referred to as semantic and communicative translation. Achieving a balance between the two is, however, an endless process.

In translation studies, the concept *equivalence* is used to describe the process of achieving this balance. Equivalence is of four types: semantic, dynamic, formal and stylistic. Dynamic equivalence is what Nida (1964), one of the

greatest Bible translators, has advocated most: to make the text relevant to the reader. In order to make sense out of very ancient religious texts, the translator would sometimes have to substitute some elements of the original with something familiar to the reader today. Thus, it is not a faithful translation but does convey the same message and could have an equivalent effect to the reader, usually a moral and spiritual one.

The other challenge is unfamiliar concepts and terms. Since Baha'u'llah's revelation is the most recent of the progressive revelation of God, there are many new concepts and ideas in the teachings. Also, His Writings are at the same time revealed in the context of the Middle Eastern, Persian and Arabic backgrounds with many references to Judaic, Christian and Islamic Faiths. For Japanese readers with the Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian backgrounds, reading His Writings requires new schemata. In this regard, translators may add commentaries and footnotes to help the reader understand the text. However, this may in reality interrupt smooth reading. Especially when it comes to prayers, they are to be recited, memorized and become part of their daily life and therefore having notes would not be conducive to fluent reading or reciting. Thus, this is an area where the reader would have to make conscious efforts.

It is often said that translation cannot convey 100% of the original nuance and therefore is an evil necessity. However, based on the above analysis, the translating process requires a great deal of insight into the original and target languages and a number of factors to consider. The result is often a more precise text than the original and is therefore easier to read. This is actually what often took place when the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith Shoghi Effendi translated Baha'u'llah's Writings from the original Persian and Arabic Writings into English, leaving little room for ambiguity for the English reader and translations of other languages. It becomes then clear that there is a good chance that the translated text would read better than the original if translating undergoes a careful and meticulous process. Lost or gained in translation? In this case, the answer should definitely be the latter.