

Beyond the Transfer Paradigm: New Insights in Bible Translation using the Dutch Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling as a Case Study

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1. Translation as a linguistic activity

For centuries, translation has been described as the transfer of one language into another.¹⁾ It was commonly held that translation, as a linguistic transfer, could focus on either form or content.²⁾ The first procedure involves converting the language forms in the source text into corresponding language forms of the target language. The second procedure aims to express the meaning of the source text naturally in the target language. In the 1960s, Eugene Nida labeled these two approaches as “formal equivalence” and “dynamic equivalence” respectively.³⁾ Nida himself strongly advocated for the second approach,

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1) This article is an elaborated version of the first part of my inaugural address, M. J. de Jong, *De Schrift Opnieuw Geschreven: Nieuw inzicht in vertalen met Genesis 1 en Job 42* (Haarlem; Antwerpen: Nederlands-Vlaams Bijbelgenootschap, 2023), 5-17.

2) J. Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 29-57.

3) E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); E. A. Nida and C. R. Faber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation (TAPOT)* (Leiden: Brill, 1969); also J. Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies*, 62-69; A. O. Mojola and E. Wendland, “Scripture Translation in the Era of Translation Studies”, T. Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2003), 1-10.

dynamic equivalence, or “functional equivalence” as he later renamed it.⁴⁾ This led to the emergence of a new type of Bible translation in natural language that spread worldwide: the Good New Bible and its many siblings.

However, reflection on translation as a linguistic activity did not stop with Nida. More recent Bible translation projects further developed the approach of dynamic/functional equivalence and aimed to address some of its weaknesses. While Nida used “functional equivalence” synonymously with dynamic equivalence, subsequent Bible translation scholars preferred to emphasize the differences between Nida’s approach and their own definition of functional equivalence. This was done in an attempt to rescue an updated version of functional equivalence from the criticism and difficulties associated with Nida’s approach.⁵⁾ The Dutch Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (NBV), first published in 2004 and revised in 2021, is a typical example of functional equivalence in the latter sense.⁶⁾ It follows the tradition of Nida but seeks to incorporate improvements and innovations.

2. Functional equivalence renewed: the case of the NBV

The NBV was intended from the outset to be a new standard Bible for the Dutch language area, serving both liturgical and cultural purposes.⁷⁾ The methodological starting point was the recognition that a good translation requires a natural and effective use of one’s own language. The functional aspect of words, their meaningfulness and effectiveness, depends on how they are employed. Since languages differ significantly in this regard, these differences must be taken into account. Otherwise, it may appear on the surface that a corresponding text has been produced, while at a deeper level irreparable damage has been caused. Furthermore, the NBV introduced new criteria to the

4) J. de Waard and E. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986).

5) For instance T. Wilt, *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, 234-235.

6) See K. F. de Blois and T. Mewe, “Functional Equivalence and the New Dutch Translation Project”, *The Bible Translator* 52:4 (2001), 430-440.

7) For an overall characterization of the NBV, R. Buitenwerf, “The New Dutch Translation of the Bible: Principles, Problems, and Solutions”, *The Bible Translator* 56:4 (2005), 253-261.

approach of functional equivalence, with two major innovations that will be addressed here.⁸⁾

2.1. Stylistic differentiation within the Biblical corpus

Most Bible translations do not reflect the stylistic diversity expressed within biblical literature. The majority of Bible translations employ a similar style and diction – whether formal, archaic, fluent, or colloquial – throughout the entire biblical corpus. While translations vary greatly from each other, a consistent style can be observed within each translation.⁹⁾ The NBV breaks this pattern by making a comprehensive effort to mirror the stylistic differentiation within the biblical corpus. This involves not only distinguishing between poetic, narrative and rhetorical texts, but also incorporating more subtle levels of stylistic variation. For each biblical book or related cluster of books, the translation established a distinct “voice” and style, formulating an appropriate strategy to express this in the translation.¹⁰⁾ In older, formally equivalent Dutch Bible translations, every biblical character speaks in an archaic tone of voice regardless of the speech situation. In NBV, the tone of voice is adjusted according to the speech situation to sound more natural. For instance, when David prays to God in 1 Chronicles 29:17, he speaks in a solemn tone of voice in the NBV, mirroring the tone in the Hebrew source text:

NBV	Ik weet, mijn God, dat U de harten van de mensen beproeft en oprechtheid verlangt. Welnu, uit de oprechtheid van mijn hart heb ik U dit alles geschonken.
NBV-E ¹¹⁾	I know, my God, that You test the hearts of people and desire sincerity. Now, from the sincerity of my heart, I have offered You all these things.

Now, let’s consider a different speech situation, in 1 Samuel 17:28, where

8) For a description of the translation method of the NBV (in Dutch), M. J. de Jong and C. Hoogerwerf, *NBV21: De vertaalmethode toegelicht* (Haarlem: Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 2021), 14-40.

9) J. Barton, *A History of the Bible: The Book and its Faiths* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), 465-466.

10) See also R. Buitenwerf, “The New Dutch Translation”, 256-258.

11) NBV-E is my own rendering of the NBV in English.

David's elder brother Eliab sharply rebukes young David. In this passage, the NBV adopts an appropriate manner of speech for an angry man publicly rebuking his younger brother:

- NBV Echt iets voor jou, om met je brutale neus vooraan te willen staan als er gevochten gaat worden.
- NBV-E Typical you, wanting to be at the forefront with your cheeky face¹²⁾ when there's going to be a fight.

Among current translations some adopt a rather formal style throughout, such as the NRSV updated edition,¹³⁾ others a more accessible style, such as the Common English Bible (CEB).¹⁴⁾ Characteristic of the NBV is the stylistic differentiation *within* the translation.

It is important to note that the stylistic relief in the translation is based on an analysis of the source text, but it reflects the source text *indirectly*, as it employs typically Dutch stylistic devices to create literary effects comparable to those found in the source text. Superficially, one could consider this a free translation, but the NBV translators were convinced that on a deeper level this rendition does justice to the emotional and situational aspects of the text, bringing it to life for the reader.

2.2. Distinction between linguistic and textual features

The second methodological innovation in de NBV was the distinction between linguistic features and textual features.¹⁵⁾ Since the primary objective was a translation in natural language, linguistic features specific to the source language should not be incorporated into the translation but should be filtered

12) The Dutch expression is, literally: "with your cheeky nose".

13) NRSV-UE 1Sa 17:28: "I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down just to see the battle", and 1Ch 29:17: "I know, my God, that you search the heart and take pleasure in uprightness; in the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things".

14) CEB 1Sa 17:28: "I know how arrogant you are and your devious plan: you came down just to see the battle!", and 1Ch 29:17: "Since I know, my God, that you examine the mind and take delight in honesty, I have freely given all these things with the highest of motives".

15) See K. F. de Blois and T. Mewe, "Functional Equivalence and the New Dutch Translation Project", 431, and R. Buitenwerf, "The New Dutch Translation", 254-255.

out during the translation process. Two examples may serve to illustrate this:

	<i>Source language feature</i>	<i>Natural Dutch</i>	<i>Natural English</i>
Genesis 3:4	לֹא־מוֹת תָּמֹתוֹן litt. “you will not dying die”	je zult helemaal niet sterven!	you surely will not die!
Acts 10:34	Ἀνοίξας τὸ στόμα εἶπεν litt. “having opened his mouth he said”	hij nam het woord en zei	he began to speak

The source text is replete with such linguistic features. In a translation aiming for functional equivalence, these elements must be consistently identified, functionally assessed, and rephrased into fitting counterparts in the target language. On the other hand, *textual* features are literary characteristics that distinguish a particular book. For example, purposeful word repetition, repeated phrases or motifs that structure a text, or intentional quotations from or allusions to other texts. These textual features should remain visible in the translation. An example is the repeated phrase תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, meaning “under the sun,” in Ecclesiastes. The phrase “under the sun” characterizes the situation of human beings “in this world,” referring to earthly life. Ecclesiastes uses this phrase 29 times, making it his literary signature. Moreover, it emphasizes the book’s overall theme that life is full of sorrow and uncertainty.

In the English Good News Translation, the phrase is translated as “in this world” or “in life,” or it is left implicit when it was felt to be redundant. As a result, this author’s signature is lost in translation. In the NBV, the phrase is consistently rendered as “onder de zon” (under the sun) in Dutch. The Dutch phrase “onder de zon” is a natural expression, but also indicative of literary and stylized language usage, distinguishing it from more colloquial expressions. In this way, it functions as the author’s signature in the translation as well.

The distinction between linguistic and textual features in the source text proved to be useful. Firstly, it represented an improvement over the formal-equivalence approach, where language features are occasionally but not systematically filtered out, resulting in arbitrariness and imbalance in the translation. In contrast, the rule of keeping all source language features out of

the translation added to the consistency of the translation method.

Secondly, the NBV approach represented an improvement over the earlier dynamic-equivalent approach, where the literary features of the biblical texts sometimes remained underexposed (as seen in the example of “under the sun”). In previous dynamic-equivalent translations, the strong focus on contextual consistency instead of verbal consistency sometimes led to an underestimation of the thematic and structural function of word repetition and other “literary signatures” found within the biblical books.¹⁶⁾

3. Progress and difficulties

The methodological innovations described above stem from the understanding that the text as a whole is the primary object in translation. The central focus of the translational act is not the individual word or sentence but the entire text,¹⁷⁾ or at least textual units with sufficient context, as meaning is constructed on the basis of textual coherence. While every textual element holds relevance in translation, each element’s importance lies in its contribution to the structure and coherence of the overall text.

This insight was formalized in the NBV procedure. Prior to commencing the actual translation, the translators conducted a comprehensive analysis of the entire text of a biblical book. This analysis aimed not only to understand the text but also to identify its formal and literary features, in search of the textual characteristics with regard to structure, style, diction, and so forth. This process established the stylistic and literary profile of the source text, serving as a foundation for distinguishing between linguistic and textual features.

As a second preliminary step the translators formulated a strategy: how can the unique literary profile of the book be faithfully reflected in the translation? Although their “book strategy” was largely guided by the project’s translation method and principles, for each individual book a strategy was defined that tailored the overall method to suit the specific literary profile of the book. Only

16) Similarly K. F. de Blois and T. Mewe, “Functional equivalence and the New Dutch Translation Project”, 435-437.

17) This insight is expressed by many recent scholars, among them P. Ricoeur, *On Translation*, E. Brennan, trans. (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 31.

after completing this initial work did the actual translation process begin.

The insight that the text as a whole is the focal point for translation and the formalization of this insight in the translation procedures reflected a new awareness of the translation process and how it can be responsibly carried out. However, during the process, various difficulties arose. Firstly, defining the literary profile of a text and identifying textual features in contrast to source language features required interpretation, and often the interpretations of the translators (and other experts involved) differed.¹⁸⁾ Secondly, even when there was reasonable agreement on the literary characteristics of a particular text, implementing them in the translation was not straightforward. There were multiple options to consider, and frequently none of them seemed to work.¹⁹⁾ This problem was inherent in the method. The principal decision to use natural target language effectively kept source language features out of the translation but could not guarantee the retention of textual features.

4. Reception and revision of the NBV

4.1. Response to the translation

When the NBV was published in 2004, it was enthusiastically received by thousands of Dutch readers, both within and outside the churches. The translation was appreciated for its natural language and literary quality, as it was

18) The NBV project was an extensive translation project in which many people were involved. The translation team comprised some twenty people, Biblical Hebrew experts, Biblical Greek experts and Dutch language specialists. A group of some sixty supervisors, representing a range of religious denominations and/or academic fields or perspectives, read the texts and gave their feedback. A coordination team of Bible translation experts facilitated the process and the discussions involved. Finally, a steering committee decided on the major issues. For an overview, see <https://www.debijbel.nl/nbv21/medewerkers-en-betrokkenen-nbv> and see K. Spronk, *Het verhaal van een vertaling: De totstandkoming van de Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (Heerenveen: Uitgeverij NBG, 2005), 50-62.

19) Acknowledged in the second pre-publication of the NBV, Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, *Werk in Uitvoering 2. Deeluitgaven Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (Haarlem; 's-Hertogenbosch, Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 2000), 368-369. During the project, the Netherlands Bible Society published three pre-publications of the NBV, entitled 'Work in Progress' (*Werk in Uivoering*, *Werk in Uitvoering 2*, and *Werk in Uitvoering 3*). This article refers a few times to these pre-publications. The Bible Society presents itself as the author of these publications.

perceived as expressive, enjoyable, and spiritually engaging. It was the first major Bible translation in Dutch to fully utilize the literary potential of the target language. However, the translation also faced a lot of criticism. In the Dutch Protestant tradition, verbal consistency (or: concordance) in Bible translation was highly valued, whereas the contextual approach of the NBV method often resulted in variation rather than verbal consistency. Some of the critics did not fully understand the method behind by the NBV, while others rejected it and judged the translation according to their own standards. The majority of critics however accepted the method but pointed out examples of what they considered excessive liberties in formulation, unconventional or anti-traditional choices, or explicit interpretations.

The Netherlands Bible Society (NBS), aware of the innovative nature of the NBV, encouraged readers to try out the translation, use it, and provide feedback. NBS promised to use the feedback in due time for a revised edition of the translation. This led to an extensive response, from Bible readers, churches, and the scholarly community. NBS gathered and analyzed this massive feedback, and between 2016 and 2020, a systematic revision of the NBV took place. The revision aimed to address structural points of criticism and improve the translation according to its own standards.²⁰⁾

4.2. Consistency

The primary issue was a lack of consistency throughout the translation. Critics had pointed out that there was more linguistic variation in the NBV than was methodically warranted. While the translation was based on contextual primacy, which meant that words were translated based on their contextual function, there were instances where words or phrases in similar contexts received different renderings, sometimes even within the same biblical book.²¹⁾ This over-variation often compromised the recognition of recurrent terms that structure the text or establish thematic lines.

20) The author was involved in the revision process as the head of translation and project leader. The process of revision is described by M. J. de Jong and C. Hoogerwerf, *Vertaalmethode*, 41-67. For an overview of the people involved, see <https://www.debijbel.nl/nbv21/medewerkers>.

21) See also K. F. de Blois and T. Mewe, "Functional equivalence and the New Dutch Translation Project", 432-433.

This critical response revealed that the strength of the NBV, its focus on the literary profile of each biblical book and stylistic differentiation within the corpus, also posed a potential weakness. While it prioritized the literary characteristics of individual books, the translation as a whole suffered from the lack of a strong editorial process to unify the various books and eliminate unnecessary variation. Such a comprehensive redaction had not been feasible prior to the initial publication in 2004, as it would have significantly delayed the process. Therefore, the revision aimed to introduce balanced consistency throughout the translation.

4.3. Controversial choices

Another issue addressed in the revision was a series of controversial translation choices. Although these choices affected only a small number of texts, they had received substantial criticism. Most of these controversial choices could be linguistically and exegetically defended as possibilities, but readers perceived an anti-traditional tendency in certain instances. For example, in Genesis 12:3 the NBV adopted the reading: “All the peoples on earth will wish to be blessed like you”, with the traditional rendering offered in a footnote: “Through you all the peoples on earth will be blessed.” This provoked significant criticism. Although the option followed by the NBV is acknowledged in biblical scholarship, in the revision process the principle was established that in contested cases the translation should follow the option with the best scholarly support. Research conducted during the revision process confirmed that in the case of Genesis 12:3 scholarly support favors the conventional rendering, which was subsequently adopted in the revised NBV²²⁾

4.4. Explication

The third recurring category of criticism related to explication in the NBV. This was a well-known problem.²³⁾ Explicit rendering was, to some extent,

22) For an extensive discussion (in Dutch), J. van Dorp, “De zegen van Abram als revisie-probleem. Herziening van de vertaling van Genesis 12:3b”, *Met Andere Woorden* 36:2 (2017), 6-21.

23) Already during the NBV project an internal evaluation had identified a tendency towards

inherently part of the approach, resulting from the use of natural language and the aim to provide an intelligible target text. Used cautiously, explicitation enhances the quality and readability of a translation, but there is a sliding scale wherein translators can easily go too far and adopt explicative renderings that have the opposite effect, for instance, if their explicitations bring in unwanted nuances. During the revision process, the NBV was scrutinized for such explicative renderings, many of which had already been identified by critical readers. In many cases, a more open formulation was found to not only accommodate readers' preferences but also enhance the literary quality of the text.

4.5. Capitalization

Lastly, one of the most commonly criticized aspects of the NBV was the decision to drop the capitalization of personal pronouns referring to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Almost all Dutch Bibles from the 18th century onwards used such capitals (the exception was the Dutch Good Nieuws Bijbel, but this translation was initially not intended for liturgical use). Although this capitalization is a standard convention in Dutch – both in liturgical and in secular contexts – the expectation during the early stage of the NBV project was that this convention was slowly running out of use. A modern, up-to-date translation for the 21st century, it was believed, should better leave these capitals out. Three decades later, it was clear that this expectation had not come true. Particularly in the religious sphere, the capital had stayed. Furthermore, the translation committee had underestimated the sentiment surrounding this capital. Many believers were deeply attached to it: for them, the capital showed reverence and respect, and its omission indicated a lack of reverence and respect for God. For a translation to be accepted as the Bible, God's authoritative word, these capitals are essential in the estimation of many Dutch readers.

Although this criticism was persistent and widely spread throughout the churches, it was difficult to evaluate it by NBV standards. From a scholarly point of view, there is not much to support it: the source text does not contain

over-explicitation. See K. F. de Blois and T. Mewe, "Functional Equivalence and the New Dutch Translation Project", 432, 438.

such capitals, and neither did the earliest Dutch translations. It is a convention that originated in the 18th century. From the literary translation method, there is not much to support it either. Such capitals do not add to the literary character of the text. On the contrary, they can provoke undue emphasis when the text is read aloud and they impair to some extent the typographical aesthetics. Argued from the translation method, it is preferable to leave them out. At the same time, it seemed far from courteous to promise readers to make use of their reactions in the revision and then ignore the issue addressed most frequently by far. It is here that approaching translation as solely a linguistic affair evidently falls short. A broader view on translation is necessary. This is where *skopos* comes to the fore as an additional perspective.

5. *Skopos* as an additional perspective

Skopos theory is based on the insight that the purpose of the translation plays a decisive role in the actual translation process, guiding the translator to choose from a plethora of different possibilities.²⁴⁾ Whereas the purely linguistic approach to translation works with the formula “source text + concept of equivalence determines the outcome,” *skopos* theory added a further factor: “goal + source text + concept of equivalence determines the outcome.”

Initially, the NBV project kept the *skopos* perspective outside. Only in the later stages of the project did the insights from *skopos* gain a foothold, as NBS realized that the translation under preparation was not “the” new translation fit for any purpose and any reader, but a particular translation primarily destined for liturgical usage and secondarily for cultural usage.²⁵⁾ The fact that this translation, with its outspoken literary character, aimed at experienced readers,

24) C. Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity. Functionalist Approaches Explained*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2018).

25) This growing awareness is reflected in K. F. de Blois and T. Mewe, “Functional Equivalence and the New Dutch Translation Project”, 432-440. For the adoption of the insights from *skopos*-theory in the NBV-project and subsequent Dutch translation projects, in particular Lourens de Vries has to be credited. See for instance L. de Vries, “Functies en Filters van de Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling”, R. Buitenwerf, J. W. van Henten, and N. de Jong-van den Berg, eds., *Ambacht en Wetenschap: Elf wetenschappers over De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (Heerenveen: Jongbloed, 2006), 27-40.

was now somewhat reluctantly acknowledged.²⁶⁾ Finally, it was conceded that the translation aimed at readers with at least some biblical and theological background knowledge.²⁷⁾

In the revision of the NBV, the insights from *skopos* theory were adopted from the start. The revision was defined on the basis of its goals, and the procedures were designed to achieve these goals.²⁸⁾ The primary goal was to improve the NBV according to its own standards in line with the structural points of criticism. Secondary goals were to improve the acceptance of the translation for liturgical usage, to live up to the promise that the readers' response would be taken seriously in the revision, and finally, to prove that giving the public's voice a place in the revision process adds something valuable.

As mentioned above, the capitalization of personal pronouns referring to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit did not fit the translation method of the NBV, yet a substantial part of the target readers saw this omission as a serious deficiency. *Skopos* theory helped the NBS understand that there had been a partial mismatch in the initial project between goals and means. The primary goal was a new translation for liturgical use, while the means was a translation method strongly focusing on literary aspects. Although in many respects the method worked towards the goal, it was not a perfect fit. In the revision process, the purpose of the translation was given priority, and it was decided to adopt the capitalization in the NBV21. The decision led to appreciation, but also to new criticism.²⁹⁾ In

26) Acknowledged in the second pre-publication of the project: Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, *Werk in Uitvoering* 2, 375-379. See also L. de Vries, "Het Eigene van De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling. Uitgangspunten, methode, doelen", K. Spronk, et al., eds., *De Bijbel Vertaald: De kunst van het kiezen bij het vertalen van de bijbelse geschriften* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2007), 11-29; T. van der Louw, "Terug naar de basisvragen. De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling in perspectief", *Wapenveld: Over geloof en cultuur* 71:4 (2021), 13-19.

27) K. F. de Blois and T. Mewe, "Functional equivalence and the New Dutch Translation Project", 438.

28) M. J. de Jong and C. Hoogerwerf, *Vertaalmethode*, 38-40, 47-56.

29) Although broadly appreciated by Dutch Bible readers, it also appeared something had changed in the Dutch context in the decades between the initial project (started 1993) and the publication of the revised edition in 2021. During the NBV-process the issue was framed as "traditional" (= Bible with capitalization) versus "modern" (= Bible without capitalization). In 2021, when the NBV21 was about to appear, the capitalization was criticized from a gender perspective by feminist theologians: in their estimation the capitalization of personal pronouns referring to God has as a damaging side-effect that the maleness of God is accentuated: he

any case, it underscores the importance of knowing the target readers, their expectations, and sensitivities in order to make balanced decisions in the translation process. Moreover, it shows that Bible translation involves much more than carefully and skillfully dealing with language.

It seems fair to say that this is where we have arrived in the Dutch context. The common view of translation as a linguistic operation remains unchanged but is clearly complemented with the insights of *skopos*. This is a workable situation and may be representative of the stance of many Bible societies worldwide.

The question, however, is whether this has brought us to the heart of translation. Have we arrived at the final formula, defining translation as “goal + source text + concept of equivalence determines the outcome”? There are reasons to question this. The first can be derived from the NBV process. We have already seen that interpretation formed a crucial part of the translation process. This was fully acknowledged but not fully regulated in the procedure. The slogan “to translate is to choose” was frequently used, but *how* the interpretative decisions were made was much less clear.³⁰⁾ In an article characterizing the NBV, Lourens de Vries refers to underlying problems of a fundamental hermeneutical nature that were not explicitly addressed in the NBV project. A case in point is the problems caused by the plurality of interpretation.³¹⁾ In order to discuss this, we must take into account some of the recent developments in the field of translation studies.

6. New insights from translation studies

An outstanding recent advancement in translation studies is the recognition that the notion of translation solely as a linguistic process is considered outdated.³²⁾ Two schemas modeling the translation process may illustrate the paradigm shift that has occurred.³³⁾

becomes He.

30) In the revision, some steps were taken in this respect. One of the revision principles was that in controversial cases, the interpretation with the best scholarly support had to be adopted.

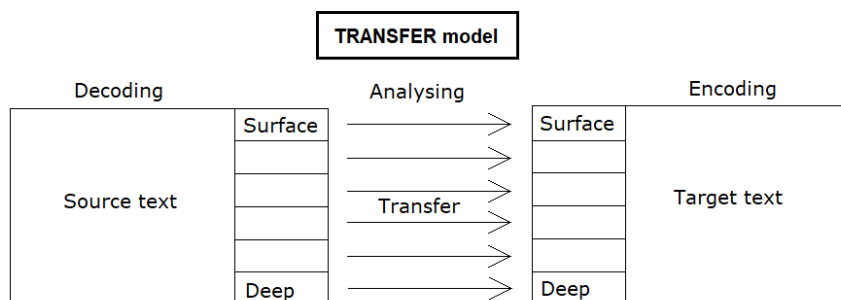
31) L. de Vries, “Het Eigene”, 28.

32) L. de Vries, “Het Eigene”, 11-29.

33) Both schema's are discussed by D. Katan and M. Taibi, *Translating Cultures: An Introduction*

6.1. The transfer model

The first schema of the transfer model, stemming from Nida,³⁴⁾ shows the familiar view of translation as a transfer from one language to another.



The translator takes a piece from the source text, analyzes it, detaches it from its linguistic code (decoding) and formulates it in the new linguistic code (recoding). The transfer model assumes that “something” is being transported from A to B. A skillful translator brings it undamaged to the other side. The translator is a language expert who operates invisibly; linguistics does the job.³⁵⁾

As the schema marks out, the transfer can be accomplished on two levels: one translates either on the surface of the text – the approach of formal equivalence – or one works with the deeper, underlying level of meaning – the approach of dynamic or functional equivalence. Either way, the process runs the same. The transfer paradigm implies a direct relation between the source text and the target text. What stands in between is a switch of linguistic code, executed on either the surface or the deeper meaning level of the text.

True, as we saw above, *skopos* theory added another factor: translation as working towards a particular goal. This opened the way for an additional perspective, complementing the method of equivalence. However, *skopos*

for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators, 3rd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2021), 190, 193.

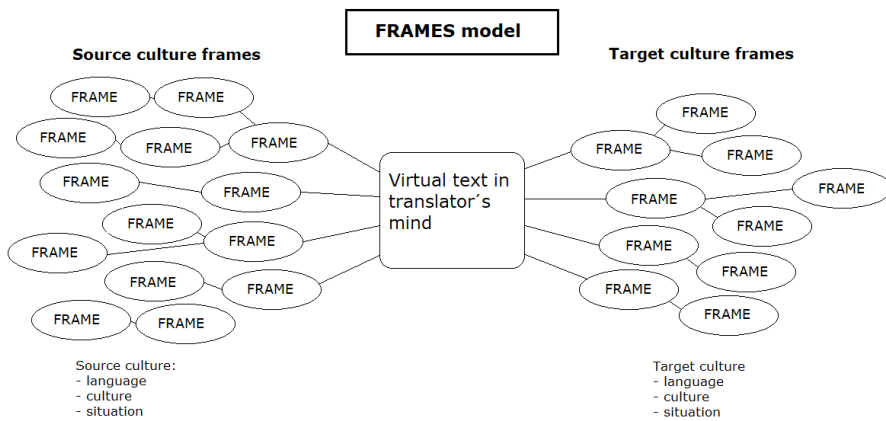
34) See E. A. Nida and C. R. Faber, *TAPOT*, 484.

35) R. Arrojo, “The Revision of the Traditional Gap between Theory & Practice & the Empowerment of Translation in Postmodern Times”, *The Translator* 4:1 (1998), 39; D. Katan and M. Taibi, *Translating Cultures*, 360.

theory did not yet part with the transfer paradigm.³⁶⁾ Subsequent translation scholars, however, did. What came in its place? During the past decades, several theories have seen the light. Here, I present a model that receives relatively broad acceptance among translation scholars.

6.2. The Frames model

The new model can be termed the frames model.³⁷⁾



According to the frames model, the relation between the source text and the target text is not a direct one. The central position is taken by the virtual text in the mind of the translator, the image that the translator forms of the text: a re-conceptualization of the source text by an act of interpretation. In this process, the translator makes a huge number of judgments, pertaining to the frames at the right and at the left. The frames at the left relate to the source text. They represent knowledge and ideas relating to the source language, the text, its

36) A. Chesterman, "Skopos theory. A retrospective assessment", *Reflections on Translation Theory: Selected papers 1993 – 2014* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2017), 60, referring to C. M. de León, "Skopos and beyond: A critical study of functionalism", *Target* 20:1 (2008), 1-28.

37) D. Katan and M. Taibi, *Translating Cultures*, 192-193. They name it 'the cognitive creation translation model', but for convenience sake I call it the frames model. Note also that in T. Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, the authors depart from Nida's transfer model (see in particular chapter 1). Timothy Wilt (in chapter 2) proposes a new model of translation in which frames of reference play a central part. This model resembles the frames model presented here in several fundamental respects.

genre, structure, style, the source culture, the situation to which the text refers, and so forth.³⁸⁾ All this results in estimations and judgments by the translator, affecting the virtual text in the translator's mind – how the translator sees it, what he/she sees in it, what he/she makes of it. At the same time, the translator also forms a virtual image of the intended target text. Here again, a range of judgments and estimations play a role, represented by the frames at the right. These frames pertain to the target language, literary aspects, the target culture with its norms, values, and sensitivities, the target audience with its needs and expectations, the theological or religious tradition the translation aims to align with, and so forth.³⁹⁾ These conceptualizations of both the source text and the target text in the mind of the translator play a vital role in the translation process.

The frames paradigm regards translation as a holistic process. A translator will, of course, pay due attention to every detail of the source text, but he or she will do so in relation to his/her conceptualization of the text as a whole. The factors related to above – the method of equivalence and the *skopos* of the translation – certainly still play an important part but do not fully determine the outcome. The frames paradigm can explain why translators working with the same method, the same *skopos*, and the same source text, still come to different results.

7. Bible translation between two paradigms

7.1. Translation as transfer remains standard

It is interesting to position the NBV between these two paradigms. First of all, the project and its translation method were defined in terms of the transfer paradigm. This is evident from the Handbook for the NBV (the project manual for the translators) and the final pre-publication in 2003, in which the translation method was once more explained to the public.⁴⁰⁾ One of the slogans that

38) D. Katan and M. Taibi, *Translating Cultures*, 190-195.

39) This model furthermore allows for external factors to be partly decisive for the translation result, such as time pressure, access to scholarly resources, pressure to follow an existing translation, see T. Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, 43-58.

40) Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, *Werk in Uitvoering 3: Op weg naar de voltooide Nieuwe*

commended the translation method to the public as “translation precedes theology.” This meant to imply that theological convictions (of translators, supervisors, or groups of target readers) were to be kept out of the translation process. Translation was deemed to be a linguistic operation on the source text, and the theological appropriation comes afterwards when the translation has been established. This position is indicative of the transfer paradigm and an over-optimistic belief in scholarly interpretation free from preconceived notions.

Yet, at the same time we also see glimpses of the frames paradigm in the NBV procedures, but without awareness of the implications. We see, for instance, a focus on texts in their entirety, emphasis on textual analysis and interpretation, and the attempt to provide an appropriate translation strategy for every biblical book. Furthermore, the translators acknowledged that translation implies constantly making choices, and that these choices, for the greater part, are not obvious or inescapable but relate to a particular reading or interpretation of the source text and contribute to a preconceived idea of what the target text should look like. The implications of this were, however, not fully addressed.

7.2. An exceptional essay

With one exception. The first publication of preliminary results in 1998 contains some of the first fruits of the new translation, including the books of Esther, Ecclesiastes, Jonah, Judith, and Acts, followed by an essay on translation.⁴¹⁾ In this essay, it is stated that “translation is not the replacement of words in one language by words from another language”. It is explained that translation must not focus on individual words or sentences but take the entire text as its focus in order to work from contextual coherence. The text as a whole has to be interpreted, divided into coherent subunits, and for each subunit the hierarchy of formal characteristics has to be established. To identify the relevant textual features, the text must be analyzed in light of the conventions of the source language and in comparison with other texts in the source domain. This analysis determines which formal (textual, stylistic, literary) aspects stand out

Bijbelvertaling (Haarlem: Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 2003), 221-261.

41) Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, *Werk in Uitvoering [Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling]* (Haarlem: Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 1998), 206-214, entitled “what is translation?”.

and are to be adopted in the translation. Similarly, at the receiving end the translation has to be assessed against the backdrop of the target language system and its conventions. This means that the source text and the translation can only be compared indirectly with each other. The essay further states that interpretation necessarily precedes any translation. The content of the text is not a given but variable and is determined by interpretation: “this implies that the reader of a translation meets the source text as if through a filter.”

The essay comes remarkably close to the frames paradigm. It states that all translation depends on interpretation. It is not a matter of choice or method, but applies both to formal-equivalent and functional-equivalent translations. Furthermore, the apparent directness of literal translation is exposed as being deceptive: these translations focus on individual words and grammatical structures at the expense of what is most relevant in translation, the coherence of the larger textual units.

However, after exploring these new grounds, the essay returns to a conventional description of translation. “Is it always possible to give a complete, fully equivalent translation?” it is asked. Yes, is the answer. “Even though it is impossible to retain every element of the source text in the translation, a translation is faithful when all functional and hierarchically important elements of the source text are adopted.” Finally, the essay concludes in familiar language: “Translation, and Bible translation as well, is the transfer of a source text into a target language.”

By now, we know that this is questionable. Many translation scholars tend to disagree. The quotation above nicely captures the problem: “a translation is faithful when all functional and hierarchically important elements of the source text are adopted.” The problem is that the decision which elements are functional and hierarchically important depends on interpretation, that is, on the translator’s judgment.

In subsequent publications, the NBV was consistently and conventionally explained in terms of the transfer paradigm. The same holds true for its successor, the NBV21. The Dutch context of Bible translation is probably not exceptional. It is attractive to keep presenting translation as a linguistic process, and the translator as a linguistically competent servant of the source text. This is how translation has been described for centuries, and it is what the audience

expects.

7.3. New insight in translation

Although the notion of translation as a transfer still holds its ground, it does not go uncontested. One scholar persistently taking arms against the transfer paradigm is Lawrence Venuti. His book *Contra Instrumentalism*⁴²⁾ is an attempt to convince non-specialists that there is not some “thing” that is “in” the text, an essence waiting for the translator to free it from its current linguistic encryption in order to be expressed anew in a different language. There is, in Venuti’s words, no *invariant* that is conveyed or rephrased. Translation never is a direct reflection of a text, but always an indirect one: interpretation stands in between. The implication of this is that a translation, by its very nature, is a text in its own right, the expression of a certain interpretation of an existing text.

This also has implications for how we regard the translator. The translator plays a crucial role, because his or her interpretation of the text is decisive. Not two translations of a text are similar because not two interpretations are completely similar. We cannot approach a text but from our own frames of reference. According to Venuti, this asks for a new perspective on translation. Commonly speaking, translation has just one essence: a translation represents its source text, and to the extent it does not, it has failed. In Venuti’s view, a translation needs to be judged and valued not in one, but in two essential aspects: similarity and dissimilarity with regard to its source. No matter how precise and how corresponding a translation is, the fact that it is a text written in another language, embedded in another time and culture makes it, both in form and meaning, a new text.⁴³⁾

8. Conclusions

The insights presented in this article regarding the frames paradigm pose

42) L. Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

43) *Ibid.*, 74, 135-136.

significant challenges for Bible translators, their organizations, and the public. However, these insights also offer an opportunity to initiate a discussion on the complex choices translators face that cannot be resolved through linguistic expertise alone. The frames paradigm recognizes the diverse factors, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that shape the translation process and emphasizes the translator's responsibility to deal with all these factors.

One must certainly not conclude from this that the importance of linguistics for translation should be relativized. Linguistic competence is essential for effective translation, a *conditio sine qua non*. Nevertheless, it is equally incorrect to view translation solely as a linguistic endeavor. According to the frames paradigm, translation is not a transfer, and the target text is not a replication of the source text. Instead, a translation can be seen as a contemporary representation of an existing text, one that fundamentally aligns with the source text while also exhibiting differences. A certain duality is therefore inherent in translation. These new insights in translation evidently ask for further reflection. One aspect that stands out is the need of transparency. Translators must not remain invisible, but step out of the wings and explain their choices. Equally important is a move toward more inclusion in translation committees and awareness that given the importance of frames of references a balanced team is the best starting point.

Also on the spiritual side some questions need to be addressed. Within our Christian tradition, we are used to regard Bible translations as representing the Bible as such, as containing God's holy Word. However, we have also come to realize that translators, like all individuals, are influenced by their own context and conceptual frameworks. The process of re-conceptualizing the source text makes every translation a child of its own age.⁴⁴⁾ Does this conflict with a Christian perspective on scripture? Perhaps not necessarily so. From the beginnings of the Christian faith, the sanctity of the Bible was not seen as enshrined within the text itself or in a holy language, but rather in the divine reality to which the Bible testifies.⁴⁵⁾ Consequently, all subsequent Bible translations are part of an ongoing endeavor to engage with God's holy Word.

44) L. de Vries, "Het Eigene", 11, explains that the choices translators make also reflect their own context and time.

45) L. de Vries, "Retranslations of Holy Scriptures: Why Keep Translating the Bible?", *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 45:10 (2019), 252-268.

Embracing the Christian view of Scripture and acknowledging contemporary translational insights, each Bible translation can be seen not only as a representation of the source text but also as a recontextualization of the eternal Word.

<Keywords>

Bible translation, Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling, interpretation, translation as linguistic transfer, translation as reconceptualization.

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<Abstract>

**Beyond the Transfer Paradigm:
New Insights in Bible Translation
using the Dutch Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling as a Case Study**

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This article focuses on recent advancements in Bible translation, using the Dutch Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (NBV) as a case study. The NBV was published in 2004 and underwent a revision in 2021. This translation follows the tradition of Nida, but also aims to enhance the method of functional equivalence with innovative elements. The 2021 edition incorporates valuable feedback from readers to improve the translation according to its own standards and draws insights from *skopos* theory to address various dilemma's. Consequently, the NBV exemplifies the contemporary stance of Bible translation that emphasizes methodological improvements and acknowledges the additional perspective of *skopos* theory. However, it still predominantly adheres to the view of translation as a solely linguistic endeavor and remains within the paradigm of translation as a transfer process.

Within the field of translation studies, the transfer paradigm has been under scrutiny for several decades. A more current paradigm (frames paradigm) recognizes that translation inherently involves a reconceptualization of the source text influenced by various factors and frames of reference. Furthermore, the translator not only reconceptualizes the source text but also envisions a particular concept of the target text. Embracing these insights entails recognizing that translation is not a straightforward transfer but is rooted in interpretative processes. While glimpses of these insights were evident in the NBV project, the translators at the time were not fully aware of the implications.

Bible translators and their organizations tend to present their translations within the framework of the transfer paradigm, conforming to the audience expectations and adhering to the traditional view of translation as reproduction of the same text in new words. However, according to the frames paradigm, the relationship between source text and translation is less direct. A translation can

be seen as a contemporary representation of an existing text, fundamentally aligned with the source text but also displaying distinct variations. Translation inherently embodies a certain duality. The current scholarly view of translation does not necessarily conflict with a Christian perspective on Scripture: a translation can be viewed not only as a representation of the source text but also as a recontextualization of the eternal Word.