THE NEVER-ENDING STORY OF BIBLE AND QUR'AN TRANSLATIONS

Attila IMRE[1]

Abstract

In our age of globalization and localization translation seems to have reached its heyday. Translation memories, glossaries, various language databases are circulating widely, and canonically traditional texts are also revived, such as religious texts. In the article below we follow the history of two most important religious texts: the Bible and the Qur'an tracking them from the first translating until the beginning of the 21st century, foreshadowing the future of their translations as well.

Keywords: the Bible, the Qur'an, translations, Romanian, Hungarian, Patois.

Introduction

One of the seminal books on translations is Weissbort & Eysteinssons publication (Weissbort & Eysteinsson, 2006), which can be easily completed with recent information from the Wikipedia. In the following, unless otherwise stated these are the two main sources.

Pictograms of the Sumerians in Mesopotamia are considered to be the first human written records dating from 3100BCE, which are the earliest found. Our presumption is that the beginnings of the history of translation are certainly 'more recent', and have to do with economics, religion and history serving the function of communication between people.

Translation scholars mention 2000 years of dated history of translation, which means that translation may be considered one of the oldest professions on earth (Lambert), although a systematic study of scholarly approach is much younger. Lambert states that the first people involved in the analysis of translation were the practitioners themselves (Lambert, 2006, p. 136), and – rather ironically – there are opinions that the biggest schism was created between these practitioners and the later theoreticians (Kuhiwchak, 2003, pp. 112–113), and theoretical explanations are indebted to translators.

The Western history of translation cannot overlook the importance of religion, more precisely the Bible translations, which definitely shaped human thinking and way of life throughout long centuries. We will highlight Bible translations in Europe, especially in Hungary and Romania, but we will also mention a very recent Bible translation, namely Patois in Jamaica, signaling that this chapter is also living history.

Although we know that it is impossible to enlist all major translations in the history of mankind, we will offer a chronological muster on the first fifteen centuries CE (AD), followed by a century-division approach up to the 20th century, focusing on the Western tradition. The closer we get to our age, the more difficult it becomes to include all the important events or translators, so we premise that this section may seem to be rather subjective.

[1] Lector univ.dr., Sapientia University of Târgu-Mureş, Romania

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Translating religious texts

Cioran thought the human beings can live without prayer, but not without the possibility of prayer (Cioran, 1999, p. 14). It is beyond the reach of the present volume to discuss the translation of all religious works. However, their importance in shaping human culture is tremendous, be it the Indian sutras into Chinese, the Qur'an into European languages or the Bible into non-European languages.

A successful translation is accepted by the target community (sooner or later), and even today many believe that the official status of a particular language largely depends on having the Bible translated into that language, as is the case of Patois.

From the Latin Vulgate to Nova Vulgata

Eugene Nida and many of his predecessors "considered Bible translations to be a key area of translation in general, and in most cultures" (Lambert, 2006, p. 134), and the translation of the Old Testament into Greek is the first milestone in this respect (3rd century BCE).

According to the legend, seventy translators were commissioned to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek on the island of Paphos (southwest of Cyprus), and each of them translated it separately, in their own cells. However, their solitary confinement resulted in perfectly identical translations, which is one of the reasons why the *Septuagint* is held in veneration, serving as the source text for later translations, such as into Latin.

Saint Jerome (347–420), also named as *Hierom, Jerom, Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus* and patron of translators, was a Roman Christian priest, confessor, theologian and historian. He became a Doctor of the Church, being recognized by both the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church as a saint. He is mostly remembered for his Bible translation into Latin.

As Weissbort and Eysteinsson point out, he could not suppress his classicist inclinations (faithful to Cicero), so his translation is rather free, offering a sense-for-sense approach (Weissbort & Eysteinsson, 2006, p. 20). Today, he is still considered to be one of the greatest translators in history, although at that time his translation was rather controversial.

The Latin version of the Bible, the *Vulgate*, was largely translated by St. Jerome (commissioned by Pope Damasus I in 382) and later became the official Bible version of the Roman Church. St. Jerome translated it from the Hebrew Tanakh and from the Septuagint, but his sources were also the Aramic version of the Septuagint and previous Latin versions (*Vetus Latina*, with "as many translations as there are manuscripts", as St. Jerome commented). The outcome is a relatively free rendering, but nevertheless conservative as per the Pope's instructions. Interestingly, his work had little or no official recognition, and versions of Vetus Latina widely circulated well after his translation. However, his Vulgate became the most powerful source for more than eleven centuries (400–1530), influencing the Middle Ages, the Renaissance until the Early Modern Period, surpassing the importance of the King James Version, as it served for prayer, liturgy,

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individual study, as well as for ecclesiastical art, architecture, hymns, paintings and mystery plays.

During the Middle Ages the translation of the Bible was heavily discouraged, although we know of Venerable Bede's lost translation of the Gospel of John into Old English (~735), of an Old High German version of Matthew in 748, a revision of the Latin Vulgate from 800 (by Alcuin) and Cyril and Methodius started the translation into Old Church Slavonic in 863.

A full Bible translation into Old French was carried out in the late 13th century and around 1360 it was translated into Czech. Wyclif's Bible from 1383 remains the most notable English Bible of the time, although it was banned by the Oxford Synod in 1408. The Hungarian Hussite Bible must have been finished by 1441, and we know of a Catalan translation from 1478. The first complete Dutch Bible was printed in Antwerp in 1526, and the first complete French Bible in 1530. The Froschauer Bible (based on Huldrych Zwingli's translation) of 1531, together with Luther's Bible contributed significantly to the Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation caused schism in the sixteenth century within Western Christianity, after Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg (1517). During this period the Bible was translated into more national languages of Europe, directly contributing to the split between Protestants and Catholics. Seemingly, the various concepts how particular passages and words should be interpreted did not find open ears in the two camps. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German (1522/1534), followed by the Polish Brest Bible (1563) and the Slovene Bible from 1584, translated by Protestant writer and theologian Jurij Dalmatin (12th nation in the world with a complete Bible in their language). This was folloed by Jakub Wujek's Polish Bible (1593), and the King James Version in English (1611).

The invention of the printing press revolutionized Bible translations, and the English *King James Version* (Authorized Version, KJV, 1611) is among the most discussed versions in English. Its predecessor, *the Great Bible*, was made compulsory in churches countrywide in 1539, and *the Geneva Bible* (1557) was nicknamed the "Bible of the Puritans." This was extremely popular, and Queen Elisabeth I wanted to unify all the church-goers with the help of one Bible. However, the *Bishop's Bible* did not reach its target, and James I acted wisely when he commissioned the universities with the translation instead of giving it to Canterbury.

Interestingly, however important it was, it was never royally proclaimed as the official Bible of the Church of England. Another interesting fact is the gender-consciousness of the translators, as at least in one passage instead of using "sons" they use "children", including both genders: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt. 5:9).

When Protestant churches started translating the Bible, they also appreciated St. Jerome's dignified style and flowing prose; the style of the *King James Version* (Authorized Version) was also heavily influenced by the Vulgate, which remains the most authoritative

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reference text until – at least – the middle of the 17th century. The reason is simple: although vernacular versions are accessible for ordinary people, educated and scholars still tend to use the Latin Vulgate.

After Reformation, when Catholics counterattacked, the official capacity of the Vulgate was given by the Council of Trent (1545–1563) as the touchstone of the Biblical canon, concluding that the book is "entire with all their parts." This single authorized text was published in 1590 again, known as the *Sistine Vulgate* (sponsored by Pope Sixtus V), although it was prematurely prepared for print with many printing errors. In 1592 it was replaced by the corrected version (*Sixto-Clementine Vulgate*), which served as the standard Bible text of the Roman Rite of the Roman Catholic Church until the appearance of *Nova Vulgata* (1979), most welcome by conservative Catholics.

Translating the Bible into Romanian

The first full translation of the Bible from the Septuagint (Frankfurt, 1597) into Romanian was carried out between 1661 and 1668 by sword bearer Nicolae Milescu. The Greceanu brothers also publish a Romanian Bible in Bucharest (*Biblia de la Bucureşti*) in 1688, which makes use of Milescu's translation.

The first *Vulgata* translation into Romanian was conducted by Petru Pavel Aron (1760–1761), which – however – remained unpublished even today. The second translation dates from 1795 and it belongs to Samuil Micu from Blaj. Further improvements of the text resulted in newer editions: Sankt Petersburg (1819), Buzău (1854–1856) and Sibiu (1856–1858); the latter was published by the Metropolitan bishop Andrei Şaguna. In 1914 the Saint Synod publishes a Romanian Bible (*Biblia, adică Dumnezeeasca Scriptură a Legii Vechi şi a celei Nouă*). The Septuagint inspires a further Romanian translation of the Metropolit Nicodim of Moldova, Gala Galaction and Vasile Radu (1936). Their translation is cross-checked with the Hebrew original, further improved by Galaction and Radu in 1938.

At present there are two main translations in use. The standard version of the Romanian Orthodox Church is the Bible of the Saint Synod, whereas Protestants predominantly have been using the translation of the orthodox dean, Dumitru Cornilescu since 1921. The revised Cornilescu Bible made its appearance in 1989, which is truthful to the sources, although in modern Romanian language.

More recently, Metropol Bartolomeu Anania published a jubilee edition of the Saint Synod based on the Septuagint.

Translating the Bible into Hungarian

Although only fragments survived, the first Hungarian Bible probably appeared between 1436–1439 (*the Hussite Bible*, carried out by Franciscan monks Bálint Újlaki and Tamás Pécsi), followed by the first full New Testament by János Sylvester in 1541. According to history, there was a full Hungarian translation of László Báthory (1456),

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which went missing during the Ottoman Hungary (1541–1699). The Jordánszky Codex contains a near-full Hungarian Bible translation from 1519 of an unknown priest.

The most notable entire Hungarian Bible was published in 1590 by Protestant Gáspár Károlyi, known as *Vizsolyi Biblia*, and its success is similar to KJV's in English. This was revised in 2003, but it is still in use. Károlyi used the original Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament during translation, although in case of the New Testament he actually adapted another Hungarian translation with little changes.

The first full Catholic version is György Káldi's translation (1626), which went through subsequent revisions (1835, 1851, 1934, 1973 and 1997). These two Bibles were used for more than three centuries, and notably important translations only appeared in the 20th century. One of them is Sándor Czeglédy's Bible, translated during the Second World War, followed by a very successful Catholic New Testament in 1951 by Gellért Békés and Patrik Dalos.

As a 'reply', the Protestants offered two new translations; one of them is Gergegly Buda's *New Testament* from 1967, whereas the other appeared in 1971 translated by the reformed bishop László Ravasz.

More recently, Sándor Vida (1971) and Lajos Csia (1978) translated two New Testaments, which are truly word-for-word translations of the original Greek, facilitating both the study of the Bible and studying Old Greek.

At present we can mention the Protestant translation of the Hungarian Bible Society (*Magyar Bibliatársulat új fordítású Bibliája*) and the Saint Stephen Society Bible of the Catholics (*Szent István Társulati Biblia*).

Hungarian Jews also translated the Bible into Hungarian from the original Hebrew in the 19th century. For instance, Móric Bloch (Mór Ballagi) published the five books of Pentateuch in both Hebrew and Hungarian in 1840, which was highly prasied for its language and style. Henrik Deutsch's translation first appeared in 1887–1889, and between 1890 and 1931 it reached to 12 editions. Probably the best quality translation of the Bible was published between 1898 and 1907 in four volumes by the Hungarian Israelite Literary Association (IMIT).

Translating the Bible into Patois

We were interested whether there are projects going on connected to brand new Bible translations, and to our amazement we discovered that a rather controversial project has been going on in Jamaica, a Commonwealth Realm. Here the official language is English, but Jamaicans primarily speak an English-African Creole language known as Jamaican Patois.

The root of the controversy is that Jamaican Patois is based on "mainly English words with elements of re-formed grammar, together with a little vocabulary from African languages and Native American words" (Wikipedia), so many contest the legitimacy of the language. We have accessed a few articles over a four-year period (2008–2012) published in the *Jamaica Observer*, which is presented in a nutshell below.

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In June 2008 Tomlinson writes about the Bible Society of the West Indies deciding to publish a Patois version of the Bible, estimated cost $60 million, which would take 12 years to finish:

> While some persons see the move as brilliant, and a big step in championing the cause of the Jamaican language, critics have denounced it as a waste of time, effort and money. In any event, they argue, a patois version of the Bible would not be taken seriously and would somehow undermine the sacredness of the Holy Scriptures. (Tomlinson, 2008)

The head of the Department of Literatures in English at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Dr Anthea Morrison, is also for Patois, but is convinced that "the sum could be spent in improving education at the primary level." However, 2 years later a gospel was launched in Canada in Patois (JIS, 2010), hoping that the full New Testament would be ready in 2012, as translator Jodianne Scott explained, predicting that the complete Bible could be expected by 2020. Interestingly, three of the four members of the translation team are graduates of the West Indies Linguistics Department, whose head was against this Bible translation in 2008.

Johnston publishes a new article (Johnston, 2011), in which he is very disappointed about the state of affairs. He is having serious doubts about the success of the Patois Bible, as poor people (the potential target readers) either cannot pay its price or can't even read. The author – supposedly – has done some 'fieldwork' as well:

> The illiterate ones couldn't read it. Some say "is Polish" as it looks like writing they see every day as they live with Russian, African etc. Some 80 per cent of the foreigners who speak English understand our patois. English speaking British illiterates could not read it though many use patois slang; a man with degrees read haltingly, said it used English phonetics and if I left the book he would master it in a week. Africans who spoke no English could not read it. One savvy Nigerian said the words were contractions, variations, broken English … Sadly "Jiizas di buk" means nothing to these men!

Naturally, Johnston draws the conclusion: the Patois Bible does not advance Patois, literacy or faith. However, the same year a further article on Patois Bible is published, which attacks Johnston's views. Reverend Courtney Stewart thinks that all new Bible translations during history have been seriously criticized, mentioning the King James Version and the Vulgate as well. Stewart also explains that the writing system is based on Frank Cassidy's development form 1961, and this Cassidy system is used at the University of the West Indies, York University in Canada and the University of Birmingham in the UK. He concludes: "The Bible Society of the West Indies believes that the Jamaican New Testament will be a great buttress for local evangelism and discipleship" (Stewart, 2011). This firm decision seems to have fructified in 2012, as in October and November more articles cover the news around the launch of Patois Bible in

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the UK. According to the commentators, the Patois Bible "is in recognition that the Jamaican Patois is a bonafide language and can be applied to the Word of God (*Jamaica Observer*, 08.10.2012). On launching the Bible, Reverend Stewart delivered a speech, stating that "it was a bit like 'colonisation in reverse'" (*Jamaica Observer*, 15.10.2012). What is more, an electronic audio version is bound to appear on ITunes, as well as mobile phone applications, which seems to be the highway to be accessible for younger generations, but not only.

Translating the Qur'an

Since the advent of both globalization and localization we have witnessed the spread of almost any text all over the world and – if the text deserved more attention – translation into multiple languages. It goes without saying that the oldest religious texts were always in the centre of attention of translators. In the following we will mention milestones in the translation of the most sacred Muslim text, the Qur'an, for which we have drawn on the Wikipedia.

In case of religious text translation is usually opposed, as believers think that non-believers should not have access to sacred texts. This was/is the case with the most revered text of the Islam world as well. As the Wikipedia reads, the translation of the Qur'an has always been a problematic and difficult issue in Islamic theology. Muslims think that their Qur'an is miraculous and inimitable, thus it cannot be reproduced in another language or form, not to mention that in many cases an Arabic word has a range of meanings. Muslims consider that without knowing the Qur'an the proper knowledge of Islam is impossible, and the Qur'an is inimitable; thus its translation is nothing but 'an imitation in another language', hence it is untranslatable. Even if many of the Muslim community cannot speak Arabic. Not very long ago the translation of the Qur'an was even considered as sin, as senses disappear in the act of translation.

Although human translation of the sacred Arabic text changes the original possible interpretations, reducing it to one possible interpretation, this has not deterred translators, who were confident enough to offer their versions. This was only possible by overlooking the changes in word meaning between classical and modern Arabic or the changed "historical circumstances of the Prophet Muhammad's life and early community in which it originated."

The first recorded translation of the Qur'an is known to belong to Salman the Persian as early as the 8th century, although the first fully attested translation into Persian dates from 884. The second known translation was into Greek (855~870). In 1143 the first Latin translation is provided by Robertus Ketenensis, who was an English monk (*Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* "The law of Mahomet the false prophet"), offering improbable and unpleasant meanings over likely and decent ones. We suspect this was possible as the original version only noted the consonants in the graphic system, without the diacritical signs; versions with indicating vowels (in forms of 'dots') were used later. Subsequent

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European "translations" of the Qur'an actually translated Ketenensis' Latin version into their own language.

Ludovico Marracci's Latin edition is accurate and suitably commented, although full of refutations. This Latin edition was the source for French and German translations.

Newer translations of the Qur'an are listed below:

- 1547, Italian, translator Andrea Arrivabene, based on Ketenensis' version;
- 1616, German, based on the Italian
- 1641, Dutch, based on the German
- 1647, French by André du Ryer
- 1649, English, based on the French

At present there are three major English versions: 1930, by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, a very accurate translation; 1934, by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, with copious explanatory annotation with over 30 printings; 1996, the Saudi-sponsored Hilali-Khan translations. However, there are more "modern" options to these, for instance the first American woman translation by Laleh Bakhtiar (*The Sublime Quran*, 2007) or the rhymed verse edition of Thomas McElwain from 2010.

According to the Wikipedia, the earliest Romanian print of the Qur'an dates from 1912 (*Coranul*) translated by Silvestru Octavian Isopescul with three further editions (1992, 2001, 2005). This translation was much criticized later, for instance by the fourth Romanian translator of the Qur'an, whos stated that the original sense is often distorted (Chelaru, 2012).

The second Romanian translation belongs to George Grigore (*Coranul*), which first appeared in 2000, followed by further editions in 2003 (a Romanian–Arabic bilingual edition), 2005 and 2007. The Islamic and Cultural League of Romania published a third translation in 2004 (http://www.islamcluj.ro/pdf/coran.pdf), whereas a fourth one seems to have appeared translated by Mustafa Ali Mehmet (*Coranul. Ultima carte sfîntă,* 2007), although this was not available in Romanian bookshops (Chelaru, 2012). The fourth translation explains why Romanian Muslims avoided the translation of the Muslim text, considering it holy only in original.

The Hungarian Qur'an was first published in 1831 in the city of Košice (*Kassai Korán*), and it is downloadable from the Hungarian Electronic Library (http://mek.oszk.hu/07400/07467/). Newer versions appeared in 1987 (a highly praised translation by Róbert Simon) and in 1994 (translation by Balázs Mihálffy, also downloadable: http://mek.oszk.hu/06500/06534/06534.pdf).

There is probably a renewed interest in the Qur'an, as we can mention two recent Hungarian translations; one of them is György Miklós Serdián's translation (*A Korán*), whereas the second one is Zsuzsanna Kiss' translation (*A kegyes Korán értelmezése és magyarázata magyar nyelven*), both having been published in 2010.

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Conclusions

If our starting-point is the very recent Bible and Qur'an translations and editions, we could say that this is the acme of religious texts and their translations. However, two things must be considered.

Firstly, the financial aspect is worth mentioning; our age of recess, a world full of all sorts of problems makes people more oriented towards promises, alternatives to this unpromising and seemingly 'doomed' world. We have a feeling that publishers know that very well, trying to make an advantage of it, offering more books than ever upon the topic of world-end and reprints of the Bible and Qur'an.

Furthermore, new translations are constantly encouraged, as previous versions can anytime be regarded as less successful ones due to the wide range of interpretations, especially in the case of the Qur'an. The table below (http://www.biblica.com/bibles/faq/19/) shows the situation of Bible translations as of 31st December 2002:

Region	Portions	Testaments	Bibles	Total
Africa	213	279	149	641
Asia	223	228	119	570
Pacific	168	204	33	405
Europe	110	31	62	203
North America	40	26	7	73
Central & South America	127	244	21	392
Constructed Languages	2	0	1	3
Total	**883**	**1,012**	**392**	**2,287**

However, five years later (in 2007), the United Bible Society announced that there are 438 available language versions and portions of the Bible could be read in 2,454 languages. In 2012 the estimated number of full Bible translations is around 450, enabling us to say that the Bible is still the most translated book in the whole world. According to the Wikipedia, in 2005 at least one book of the Bible has been translated into 2,400 of the 6,900 languages listed by SIL, and even today the United Bible Societies are presently assisting in over 600 Bible translation projects.

The future of the Bible is also secured. *Vision 2025* is a project aiming to start translating the Bible into "every remaining language community that needs it", initiated by the Wycliffe Bible Translators in 1999 (http://www.wycliffe.org/about/statistics.aspx).

As for the Qur'an, in 1986 there were 2,672 translations worldwide (cf. Research Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture, http://www.ircica.org/content/irc580.aspx), copies and different editions of 551 complete and 883 incomplete translations and

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selections in 65 languages. The Wikipedia enlists 56 different languages (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_translations_of_the_Qur%27an), but, for instance, Romanian is not even listed. Suras of Qur'an are recited in Arabic by Muslims all over the world, even if they do not understand Arabic. Their view on translations remains unchanged: these are mere explanations to help convey the original. Whatever their view, the Qur'an, as well as the Bible remain a never-ending story of translation history.

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