

Prescriptive or descriptive: The case of translating *bless*

This paper explores how an English word *bless* (*brk* in Biblical Hebrew) is differently expressed in Korean. The current study takes a semantic approach to provide an explanation on three ways translation of *bless* by employing thematic roles. This study also examines whether this usage is well observed in writings other than the Bible and raises a question whether translators should take a prescriptive approach or a descriptive approach.

The word *bless* is translated into three different verbs in the Korean language: (i) *pokcuta* ‘give a blessing’ (ii) *chukpokhata* ‘ask God for his blessing (on behalf of someone)’ (iii) *songchukhata* ‘praise’. To verify this, the current study examined two English versions of the Bible: King James Version (KJV) and New International Version (NIV) and found 516 tokens (i.e., *bless*, *blessing*) in KJV and 425 tokens in NIV. The Korean equivalence of each token in the *kayyekkayceng sengkeyng* [the Revised Version of the Bible] was examined. The three verbs (in the data examples on the following page) were used in the Korean version of the Bible; and no exception was found.

This three-way translation phenomenon can be explained by means of thematic roles. On the one hand, as in (1), when God is an agent, the verb becomes *pokcuta* ‘give a blessing’ because God is the only one who can give blessings. In this case, the verb is consistent regardless of what comes for an object. On the other hand, examples in (2) and (3) have a human agent; in this case, depending on the theme, verbs realize differently. When the theme is a human being as in (2), the verb becomes *chukpokhata* ‘asking God for his blessing on behalf of someone (object)’. This is because people cannot give blessings but just ask for them. When the theme is God as in (3), the verb changes to *songchukhata* ‘praise’; since what people do is to praise God.

This ‘one-to-many equivalence’ (Leal, 2012) between source language and target language is a good example of ‘dynamic equivalence’ in terms of Nida (1964), which reflects the target language’s culture. The notion of equivalence is, in nature, prescriptive in that it is generally associated with the source text, trying to evaluate whether the translation and the source text are of equal value. More recent translation studies, i.e., Descriptive Translation Studies (Toury, 1980, 1995), tend to seek descriptive approaches that follow norms of cultures and ages of particular.

In addition to the examination of the Bible, a preliminary study has been conducted to see how *pokcuta* and *chukpokhata* are used in context other than the Bible. By using the Google search engine, two key words associated with ‘God’s blessing’ were searched: *hananimui pok*, which is prescriptively correct, and *hananimui chukpok*, which is not correct prescriptively. The first ten articles were examined from each search. The results showed that from the search of *hananimui pok*, only three articles used *hananimui pok* correctly, three used the words partly correctly, and four used the word prescriptively incorrectly. Rather strikingly, from the search of *hananimui chukpok*, eight articles used the word prescriptively incorrectly and only two showed partly correct usage. The results reveal that preference on the word *chukpok(hata)* over *pok(cuta)* is dominant regardless of context. The translation of *bless* can be an example of dynamic equivalence which is rather prescriptive. However, this prescriptive grammar seems not to be well observed in non-biblical context at present.

This study has examined three-ways translation of *bless* in the Korean Bible and provided the semantic/syntactic explanation by employing thematic roles. According to the preliminary research in this study, the two words, *pok* and *chukpok* are used prescriptively incorrectly to a great extent. Under this circumstance, the question whether *pok* should be used in a prescriptively correct way remains open.

Data

- ¹(1) Hananimi neeykey **pokul cusie**
Hananim-i ne-eykey pok-ul cu-si-e
²God-NOM you-DAT **blessing.OBJ give-HON-CON**
'God bless thee' (Genesis 28:3 KJV)
- (2) Issaki kueykey **chupokhako**
issak-I kue-eykey chupok-ha-ko
Isaac-NOM him-OBJ **asking.God.for.his.blessing-do-CON**
'Issac blessed him' (Genesis 28:1 KJV)
- (3) tawisi yehowalul **songchukhaye**
tawis-i yehowa-lul songchuk-ha-ye
David-NOM Johovah-OBJ **praise-do- CON**
'David blessed Johovah' (1Chronical 29:10 KJV)

References

- Leal, Alice (2012). Equivalence. Handbook of Translation Studies. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing. 39-46
- Nida, Eugene A. (1964). *Toward a science of translating*. Leiden: E.J. Brill
- Toury, Gideon (1980). *In search of a theory of translation*. Tel-Aviv: Porter Institute.
- Toury, Gideon (1995). *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

¹ The equivalences of *bless* in (1) (2) and (3) are all *brk* in the Biblical Hebrew

² NOM=Nominative; DAT=Dative; OBJ=Objective; HON-Honorific; CON=Connective