

Importance of and Guidance on Translating the Bahá'í Writings into Indigenous and Other Languages *

prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Regarding the translation of the Books and Tablets of the Blessed Beauty, ere long will translations be made into every tongue, with power, clarity and grace. At such time as they are translated, conformably to the originals, and with power and grace of style, the splendours of their inner meanings will be shed abroad, and will illumine the eyes of all mankind. Do thy very best to ensure that the translation is in conformity with the original.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, number 31.13) [1]

From Letters written by the Universal House of Justice

It is, of course, permissible to translate Bahá'í writings into other languages and dialects of languages. It is also possible to simplify or paraphrase the Bahá'í writings in order to facilitate their translation into languages and dialects having small vocabularies. However, it is not permissible to publish simplifications and paraphrases of Bahá'í writings as Bahá'í Scripture.

(13 March 1969 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [2]

With the exception of certain oriental languages such as Turkish, Arabic and Urdu, which are related to the original Persian or Arabic, new translations of the Sacred Text into languages other than English must be made from the Guardian's English translation where it exists. When there is no translation into English by Shoghi Effendi of a particular passage, the National Spiritual Assembly concerned should seek the advice of the Universal House of Justice. When translations already exist, which are not made from the Guardian's English text, but have been published and approved, they may be used.

(28 March 1971 to all National Spiritual Assemblies) [3]

* This compilation was first posted in plain-text at http://worldlanguageprocess.org/essays/uhj_on_gender.htm (2002). It was formatted and reposted at https://bahai-library.com/compilation_translating_writings_indigenous (2021).

The point is well taken that it would unduly delay fundamental Baha'i teachings being published in a number of languages if we were to await the availability of Baha'is competent to make the translations. Summaries, commentaries and simple re-statements of the Guardian's writings, provided the text itself is not attributed to the Guardian, are to be encouraged.

(13 August 1972 to the Hands of the Cause of God in the Holy Land) [4]

We realise that translation is a very difficult task and that however good a translation is there are always differences of opinion, both as to accuracy and style. However, in translating Bahá'í Scripture it is important to remember that the style in the original is an exalted one and this aspect should not be lost when it is translated into other languages. It can be noted, for example, that when the beloved Guardian was making his translations into English he used a style that is far from being that of modern English usage but is admirably suited to the richness and imagery of the original.

(12 August 1973 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [5]

We have noticed a tendency in a number of countries to attempt to translate Bahá'í literature into the current, easy, everyday language of the country. This, however, should not be an overriding consideration. Many of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are in exalted and highly poetic language in the original Persian and Arabic and you will see, for example, that when translating Bahá'u'lláh's Writings into English the beloved Guardian did not use present-day colloquial English but evolved a highly poetic and beautiful style, using numbers of archaic expressions reminiscent of the translations of the Bible.

(7 October 1973 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [6]

As to Counsellor ...'s question in his letter of January 22, it may be pointed out to him that the translation and recording of some of the Holy Writings into native dialects not only helps the teaching work and pays honour to the native languages, but also provides the way to achieve an objective established by the Master and the beloved Guardian. Both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi often encouraged the friends to memorize passages from the Writings and such a practice acquires added importance in areas where there is a shortage of printed literature or a high degree of illiteracy. Consequently, availability of passages from the Holy Writings in native dialects is an important aspect of a successful deepening programme.

(19 February 1975 memorandum to the International Teaching Centre) [7]

From Letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

In most languages each word has a range of meanings and also a penumbra of connotations. Certain of these overlap, giving rise to synonyms which are interchangeable in some contexts but not in others. It is seldom that there is an exact correspondence between the range of meanings and connotations of a word in one language and those of its nearest equivalent in another language. This lack of correspondence is particularly evident between the words of languages used in widely separate parts of the world or in very different cultures.

The House of Justice feels, therefore, that to construct a rigid list of Dutch words which are always used to translate certain other English words would not only be unnecessary but definitely misleading. As the beloved Guardian pointed out, the word “Bahá” signifies at once the “Glory”, the “Splendour” and the “Light” of God; there is no single word in English which can express all these. Thus, as you have noted, it is translated as “Glory” in the use “Bahá’u’lláh”, while in the list of the months, where “Jalál”, the second month, is translated “Glory”, “Bahá” is translated “Splendour”. All translations are, to some degree, inadequate.

Those who are entrusted with the task of translating the Sacred Writings from the original into English should study the original very closely, and then attempt to express as accurately and as beautifully as possible in English that which the original conveys. To do this they frequently have to use various different synonyms in English to give the best translation of the same Arabic or Persian word when it appears in different contexts. Conversely, they may have to use the same English word in different contexts to translate various different words in the original. In doing this they attempt to follow the example set by Shoghi Effendi in his magnificent translations.

The House of Justice suggests that, although your committee should, of course, follow the instruction of the Guardian to make your translations into Dutch from the English translations rather than from the original Persian or Arabic, you may find it helpful to consult Persian believers who are well-versed in Dutch and who could check with the original Texts for you. This could help you to make the correct choice of word in Dutch when the English wording seems ambiguous.

(31 May 1981 to a National Translation and Revision Committee) [8]

Translation is, indeed, a very difficult art, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained that, ideally, all translations of the Sacred Texts should be made by competent committees,

rather than by individuals. At the present time, unfortunately, there is seldom in any country a large enough number of sufficiently skilled persons who can be called upon to constitute such committees, and the institutions of the Faith have to rely on the services of such individuals as they can find with adequate time and skill to undertake the arduous work of translation.

The Writings of the Faith are not in the nature of scientific treatises. One must remember that the Manifestation of God is using the inadequate instrument of human language to convey truths and guidance which can raise mankind high above its present level of development and understanding. He makes extensive use, therefore, of metaphor and simile, and often approaches a subject from several different points of view so that its various facets and implications can be better understood. It would not be possible, therefore, to compile a list of meanings for specific symbols, expressions and words, since they may vary in their implication from passage to passage.

The translation of a passage can seldom be an entirely faithful rendering of the original— one just has to strive to make it as faithful and befitting as possible. At the present time many of the translations of the Writings fall far below the desirable standard, especially in those languages spoken by a relatively small number of Bahá'ís, but time and an increase in the number of Bahá'ís who have a profound understanding of the Teachings as well as an exemplary command of the languages concerned will enable new and improved translations to be produced. For the time being we must do what we can with what we have.

(8 September 1985 to an individual) [9]

With regard to your question about the style of English used in the translation of Bahá'í prayers, we are asked to point out that finding an adequate style in English for expressing beautifully the poetic, metaphorical and allusive style of many of the Bahá'í Scriptures is not easy. The Persian and Arabic of the Bahá'í Writings are themselves considerably different from the current styles and usages in those languages. Shoghi Effendi's solution of using a slightly archaic form of English, which is somewhat equivalent to the use in the original languages, makes possible the use of images and metaphors that might seem strange if expressed in modern English....

Books of Scripture themselves mould the language in which they are written. The House of Justice believes that if translators strive to render the words of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá into English in a way that reproduces as accurately as possible the meaning of the originals, that is as beautiful as possible, and that harmonizes closely with the style used by Shoghi Effendi, these Writings themselves will have a far-

reaching effect on the ability of Bahá'ís, and especially Bahá'í children and youth, to use the English language effectively for thought and for expression.

(3 February 1988 to an individual) [10]

Of course the most fundamental requirement for the attainment of a good translation is the availability of a translator who has not only a thorough understanding of the original language, but also is able to write in clear and beautiful French, so that he can re-express in French not only the true meaning of the original, but can clothe it in language which appropriately reproduces in the French idiom the beauty of style of the original. While a literal translation is almost inevitably a bad translation, the translator must guard against departing from or adding to the meaning of the original even though he may have to use a phrase to translate a word, or reduce a phrase in the original to one word in the French, or recast the order of a sentence, or replace a metaphor which would be meaningless if translated literally by an equivalent one which conveys the same meaning. In translating Shoghi Effendi's writings in particular you may find that many of his long sentences, which are perfectly clear in English, are impossible in French and must be divided into shorter ones.

If there is no French-speaking Bahá'í with the requisite command of both English and French, or if such friends are over-burdened, you may most certainly employ non-Bahá'í translators. Here, however, you may face another problem, that of the translator's understanding of the Bahá'í teachings which underlie the words. It would be essential for you to have such translations carefully checked by knowledgeable Bahá'ís, who can raise with the translator any passages which they feel convey the wrong meaning.

When you are having any of the Sacred Texts translated on the basis of authorized English translations, you should involve in the work one or more Bahá'ís who are fluent in French and are also familiar with the original Arabic or Persian. Thus, when the translator finds he is unable to grasp the exact meaning of the English words, his understanding can be illuminated by reference to the original texts.

(2 December 1988 to a Bahá'í Publishing Trust) [11]

Translation is indeed a difficult issue, and it is for this reason that the official version of the messages and letters of the Universal House of Justice are sent in the original English. Any translation offered is unofficial and simply intended as an assistance to those who might wish to avail themselves of it, and National Spiritual Assemblies are free to make their own translation in accordance with local language needs. This also applies to the statement on Bahá'u'lláh which the House of Justice requested you to translate into Chinese.

(7 August 1991 to an individual) [12]

You ask what is the purpose and wisdom of the translation of the Bahá'í Writings, and what is the philosophy behind it.

As you know, one of the principles of the Bahá'í Faith is for a single language to be adopted as the universal auxiliary language of mankind, to be taught in the schools of all the nations. When that time comes, the need for so many translations will be greatly reduced, since there will be one common medium of communication for all who dwell on earth. Alas, however, it will take some time yet for the governments of the world to adopt such a far-reaching and fundamental measure.

In the meantime it is essential for the Bahá'ís to convey the Word of God to all the peoples of the world, as quickly and as completely as possible. For this, translation is essential. The Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are, as you know, in Arabic and Persian, as are those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Who also wrote some Tablets in Turkish. Shoghi Effendi, for his part, wrote many of his most important works in English. To expect the Japanese Bahá'ís to learn Arabic, Persian and English sufficiently well to really understand the Bahá'í literature in those three tongues would be too great a demand. Fortunately, there is already a wealth of the Arabic and Persian Writings translated into English, but even if the friends' command of English is sufficiently good for them to fully comprehend such Writings, there is an important emotional and psychological advantage to their being able to read the Word of God in their own mother tongue. Thus we engage in translating the Writings into even tribal languages which have quite a small number of native speakers.

(14 December 1992 to an individual) [13]

Your letter of 9 May concerning the translation of Bahá'í literature into Georgian has been received and we have been instructed to reply as follows. You have asked whether Bahá'í literature should be translated from English or Russian. In principle, the desirable course is to translate from English, as the English translations have been made by the Guardian or authorized by the Bahá'í World Centre. If this is not practical at the moment, then provisional translations can be made from Russian until such time as proper translations from English can be prepared. Such a solution is far better than waiting and being without Bahá'í literature in the native tongue of your region.

(23 May 1995 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [14]

Equally important is the right of the members of indigenous populations to learn, speak, write and communicate in their native tongue, if they so wish, in addition to the official language of the country in which they reside, for language is the expression of the spirit of a people and the vehicle of its cohesive and inspiring traditions. Facility in one's native

language in addition to the official language of one's country can produce an enrichment of the heritage of the entire people and can act as a stabilizing influence in society, while the cultural oppression which seeks to obliterate minority languages can have a deracinating and demoralizing effect that will be very difficult to correct. Furthermore, Bahá'ís advocate the development or adoption of an international auxiliary language by which all the peoples of all countries and cultural backgrounds will be able to communicate.

(25 July 1995 to an individual) [15]