

The Difficult Art of Translation — Selected Extracts
From Letters Written By and On Behalf of the Universal House of Justice
Concerning the Translations of Shoghi Effendi *

prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

The matter of translation is a major problem. As you yourself know only too well, to convey exactly the meaning and flavour of a passage from one language to another is often impossible and one can but labour to approach as near as possible to the unattainable perfection. Even our beloved Guardian, whose skill in this art amounted to genius, characterized his translation of the “Kitáb-i-Iqán” as “one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation” and he expressed the hope “that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá’u’lláh’s matchless utterance.”

The difficulty of translation increases when two languages express the thoughts and metaphors of widely differing cultures; thus, it is infinitely more difficult for a European to conceive the thought patterns expressed in Arabic or Persian than to understand a passage written in English. Moreover, the beloved Guardian was not only a translator but the inspired Interpreter of the Holy Writings; thus, where a passage in Persian or Arabic could give rise to two different expressions in English he would know which one to convey. Similarly he would be much better equipped than an average translator to know which metaphor to employ in English to express a Persian metaphor which might be meaningless in literal translation.

Thus, in general, speakers of other European tongues will obtain a more accurate translation by following the Guardian’s English translation than by attempting at this stage in Bahá’í history to translate directly from the original.

This does not mean, however, that the translators should not also check their translations with the original texts if they are familiar with Persian or Arabic. There may be many instances where the exact meaning of the English text is unclear to them and this can be made evident by comparison with the original....

We also feel that it is still premature to decide upon the question of the International Auxiliary Language. It is quite clear from the Texts that any living or invented language may be chosen, but the time and manner of its choosing and propagation are not yet decided.

(8 December 1964, from a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [1]

* 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/uhj_difficult_art_translation (2021).

A translation should of course be as true as possible to the original while being in the best possible style of the language into which it is being translated. However, you should realize that it will not be possible to translate the Tablets adequately into easy, modern Dutch. Many of the original Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are written in very exalted and poetic Persian and Arabic and therefore a similar flavour should be attempted in the language into which it is translated. You will see, for example, that in translating the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh into English the beloved Guardian has created a very beautiful and poetic style in English using many words which might be considered archaic and are reminiscent of the English used by the translators of the King James version of the Bible.

As you point out, a literal translation is often a bad one because it can produce a phraseology of imagery that would convey the wrong impression; thus, a translator is at times compelled to convey the meaning of the original by means of a form of words suited to the language. However, a person translating the Bahá'í Writings must always bear in mind that he or she is dealing with the Word of God, and, when striving to convey the meaning of the original, he should exert his utmost to make his rendering both faithful and befitting.

(29 October 1973, from a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [2]

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, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [3]

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.

Furthermore, styles of writing are changing comparatively rapidly. If it were already found necessary to use a style different from that used for translations fifty years ago, one can estimate that a further change would be called for fifty years hence. One merely has to consider the large number of new translations of the Bible that have appeared, and are still appearing, and yet many English-speaking Christians prefer to continue using the Authorized Version in spite of its proven inaccuracies. Holy Scriptures have a profound meaning for their readers, and to change the familiar words too often can be gravely disturbing.

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, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [4]

It must be remembered that Shoghi Effendi's translations carry with them a large measure of interpretation of the intent and purpose of the Author of the text he set about to translate—an interpretation which he, as Interpreter of the Sacred Text, could alone authoritatively provide.

(27 February 1989, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [5]

You ask whether the translations of Shoghi Effendi should be considered as the “standard” and whether, because of his function as infallible interpreter, the Guardian's translations provide “the true interpretation of the Writings”. We are asked to call attention to the Introduction to “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas” where the Universal House of Justice describes the essential qualities of the Guardian's translations and the fact that they “are illumined by his uniquely inspired understanding of the purport and implications of the originals”.

(15 December 1994, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [6]

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter dated 9 August 1999 in which you seek to know how soon will the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh be published in “the common language of standard English to facilitate teaching”. We have been asked to respond as follows.

The House of Justice appreciates your desire to make the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh accessible to your relatives and others who may dismiss them as illogical because of the style in which they are written. Nevertheless, to attempt to express the highly poetic, metaphorical and allusive terminology of the Bahá'í Writings in plain, modern English would either be banal or would render many of the passages strange and foreign. The Guardian's use of a style of English that is slightly archaic, a style in which there is an abundance of spiritual and poetic terminology, acts as a bridge between the English of today and the style of the Persian and Arabic Writings of the Founders of our Faith.

In comparing the translation of the Bible with that of Bahá'í Texts, you may realize that the Hebrew of the Old Testament is far more blunt and straightforward than the Persian and Arabic of the Bahá'í Writings. Additionally, the koine Greek of most of the New Testament is the everyday speech of that time. The challenges posed to translators of the Bahá'í Writings are much more exacting than those that confront translators of the Bible. It is therefore not advisable to use one kind of translation as a standard for the other.

Finally, although it is not possible to translate the Writings in a manner that brings them in conformity with the standards of common English, you may be confident that if the hearts of those to whom you present the Writings are ready, the style of the Sacred Texts will not stand as a barrier to their understanding and accepting the teachings.

(2 September 1999, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [7]