

Published: November 2014

Peer-review, the King James Bible and the importance of language

Brian Williams - Epidemiologist affiliated to SACEMA.

It is never my custom to use words lightly. If twenty-seven years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact upon the way people live or die. — Mandela, N., International AIDS Conference, Durban, July 2000.

King James VI of Scotland, I of England, (1567–1625) was a contemporary of Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) and René Descartes (1596–1650) and lived just before Isaac Newton (1642–1727) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716). Believing in witchcraft as well as in logic and reason, living on the cusp of the scientific revolution, he bridged the medieval and modern worlds. During his reign he commissioned the most influential book ever to be written in English. While the language of the King James Bible has done much to define modern English, it can be argued that the Bible also developed, for the first time, the notion of peer-review which is at the very heart of modern science. And one may argue further that the way in which he organized the writing of the new Bible holds lessons for how we should organize our scientific lives today.

One might argue, with justification, that the only tract of quality that was written by a committee was the King James Bible, commissioned in 1604 and published seven years later. It behoves us to think about why this worked so well while almost everything else written by committees has, or should be, confined to the nearest waste bin. James's motivation for commissioning the Bible was, at least in part, to carve a path between the Protestant and Catholic extremes of Christianity—not to challenge either but rather to reconcile them.

The project was led by Richard Bancroft and from the beginning it was 'tightly organized, tightly policed and tightly managed'. Money was in short supply and various Bishops were told that they would have to provide livings for the Translators. The Translating Committee was divided into six Companies because six is the number of the Trinity multiplied by the number of testaments. Each Company was to have eight members giving a total of forty-eight translators this being the number of Apostles multiplied by the number of Evangelists. Bancroft issued a letter of instructions to the Translators entitled 'The Rules to be Observed in Translation'. Rules 1 to 5 were concerned with ensuring continuity with the currently accepted

views, the naming conventions for religious figures, the use of old or current words, and the division of Chapters into Verses. The new bible should look and feel as much as possible like the old. Rules 6 and 7 dealt with marginal notes, references and quotations.

Rules 8 to 11 are the key to the project.

Rule 8 says that *Every particuler man of each company to take ye same chapter or chapters, and having translated or amended them severally by himselfe where he thinks good, all to meete together, confer what they have done, and agree for their Parts what shall stand.* People shall work alone but consult regularly within each company.

Rule 9 says that *As one company hath despatched any one book in this manner they shall send it to the rest to be considered of seriously and judiciously; for His Majestie is verie carefull of this point.* Once a company has reached consensus they will send it to the other companies for peer review.

Rule 10 says that *If any Company, upon ye review of ye books so sent, really doubt, or differ upon any place, to send them word thereof, note the place, and withal send their reasons; to which if they consent not, the difference to be compounded at ye generall meeting, which is to be of the chiefe persons of each company, at ye end of ye work.* There will be a chance to respond to reviewers and a committee will have the authority to make the final decision.

Rule 11 says that *When any place of speciall obscuritie is doubted of, letters to be directed by authority to send to any learned man in the land, for his judgment of such a place.* If agreement cannot be reached further authorities may be consulted on particular matters.

In addition, Rule 12 admonishes the clergy to provide support, Rule 13 names the directors of each company, Rule 14 names the earlier English translations that are to be consulted including Tindall's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, Whitchurch's and the Geneva Bibles. The Bishop's Bible is not mentioned as it was known that this was to be the ground against which all other translations were to be judged. Finally, Rule 15 concerns uniformity between translation of the Old and New Testaments. The instructions are written on two sheets of paper and a copy is held at the University Library in Cambridge.

The six Companies were the First and Second Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge Companies, each with a Director and about a dozen members, with each company being held responsible for about a dozen Books. The Director of the First Westminster Committee was Lancelot Andrews who recruited interesting people to his team: John Overall, a classicist, Hadrian Saravia a general linguist, Richard Thompson, a linguist who was also known as one of the wittiest interpreters of the 'wildly obscene epigrams' written by the poet Martial in 'Nero's Rome', William Bedwell a mathematician and Arabist. None were leading Hebrew Scholars but all were talented men in their own fields.

So what might we learn from the writing of the most influential book ever written in English? First, plan carefully and create an appropriate structure and line of authority for the project. Second, make the instructions clear and simple. Third, employ talented people. Fourth, make sure that each person knows what he (in this case) has to do but then leave him to do it. Finally, set up an effective system of peer review so that the final product is of the highest standard, all issues and debates are resolved, while ensuring that it has a coherence and a beauty to it.

So let us end by noting what the modern world has done with King James Bible. In Luke 1:57, the moment when Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, gives birth the Bishop's Bible reads:

*Elizabeths time came that she should
bee delivered, and she brought forth
a son.*

The King James Translator on his own in his room marks the text very carefully and suggests:

*Now Elizabeths time was fulfilled
that she should bee delivered, and
she brought forth a son.*

But 'was fulfilled' is not quite right and is crossed out and replaced with 'full time came' so that it reads:

*Now Elizabeths full time came that
she should bee deliuered, and she
brought forth a sonne.*

Finally, we come, four hundred years later, to the New English Bible which says:

*Now the time came for Elizabeth's
child to be borne, and she gave birth
to a son.*

So, as Adam Nicolson, the author of the book from which all of this is taken notes: 'The flattening of language is a flattening of meaning. Language which is not taut with a sense of its own significance, which is apologetic in its desire to be acceptable to a modern consciousness, language in other words which submits to its audience, rather than instructing, informing, moving, challenging and even entertaining them, is no longer a language which can carry the freight the Bible requires. It has, in short, lost all authority.'

Five hundred years later modern science owes much to King James for developing the notion of peer-review, for showing us how to work in committees, and reminding us, as Nelson Mandela did more recently, of the power and the importance of words.

The King James Bible defined modern English. But the way in which he organized the translation of the Bible holds lessons for how to manage our scientific lives today and the system he developed for evaluating and assessing the translation of the Bible is the basis of our modern notion of 'peer-review'. His contribution to science may have been even greater than his contribution to the English language.

Brian Williams - Epidemiologist affiliated to SACEMA. Area of research interest: mathematical biology. williamsbg@me.com

This article is inspired by the book 'God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible' by Adam Nicolson (Harper Collins, New York; 2003)