

The Book of Mormon as a Communicative Act:

Translation in Context

Translation

An Introduction to the Problem

Each individual word of Scripture, the questionable reasoning suggests, was specifically selected by God and delivered to us from above in a manner very similar to dictation. The words were sent down, one at a time, like crystal droplets. Each word is an autonomous integer, separate from the rest, and each is to be treasured like a sacred gem and cherished inviolate for all time.

When it comes to translation preference and practice, the implications of this way of thinking are predictable. Those who view Scripture this way (and not all evangelicals do, of course) favor attempts at word-for-word translation. Translations produced in this fashion are naively thought to retain all the precious original words, except that they are just in a different code now. The inclination is to assume that in every language there is a template of more or less exact equivalents to the inspired Hebrew and Greek words with which we started out. This is, of course, not the case at all. If evangelicals are to get beyond their current impasse over translation theory, they will need a more profound doctrine of biblical inerrancy—one that continues to respect the inspired words of the original text but also acknowledges that these words are mere instruments in the service of a higher purpose, namely, the communication of meaning.

I have an old edition of the New Testament in the Latin, Hebrew, German and Greek languages. I have been reading the German, and find it to be the most correct translation, and to correspond nearest to the revelations which God has given me for the last fourteen years.

Joseph Smith, King Follett Discourse
(Published Version)

All of the Presidents of the Church, beginning with the Prophet Joseph Smith, have supported the King James Version by encouraging its continued use in the Church. In light of all the above, it is the English language Bible used by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph would put the seer stone into a hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and

when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.⁵

The manuscripts and text show that Joseph Smith apparently received the translation word for word and letter for letter, in what is known as “tight control.”

THE
BOOK
OF
MORMON

ANOTHER TESTAMENT
OF JESUS CHRIST

The Gift and Power of God

The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians; having been found through the ministration of an holy angel, and translated into our own language by the gift and power of God.

I would inform you that I translated, by the gift and power of God, and caused to be written, one hundred and sixteen pages, the which I took from the Book of Lehi, ...

And he, by a gift from God, has translated it into our language.

it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and...it was not expedient for him to relate these things

And it came to pass in the days of Mosiah,
there was a large stone brought unto him with
engravings on it; and he did interpret the
engravings by the gift and power of God.

Omni 1:20

It is still appropriate to call Joseph Smith the translator of the Book of Mormon, but he wasn't a translator in the usual sense of the term. He was a translator in the sense of being the human involved in transferring or re-transmitting a concrete form of expression (mostly English words) received from the Lord.

Your first inquiry was, whether it was proper to say, that Joseph Smith Jr., was the author? If I rightly understand the meaning of the word author, it is, the first beginner, or mover of any thing, or a writer. Now Joseph Smith Jr., certainly was the writer of the work, called the book of Mormon, which was written in ancient Egyptian characters, - which was a dead record to us until translated. And he, by a gift from God, has translated it into our language. Certainly he was the writer of it, and could be no less than the author.

Authenticity

Using chiasmus to strengthen the claim of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient historical record is based on the assumption that Joseph Smith was unaware of chiasmus.

The historical record has yielded no direct evidence that Joseph Smith actually knew about chiasmus when he translated the Book of Mormon in 1829, although some other people at that time did.

Horst Steinke

**Vico's "Liber metaphysicus":
An Inquiry into its Literary Structure**

With an Appendix:

Notes on Vico's "Inaugural Orations", their
proposed chiasmic composition, and some
hermeneutical implications

- 1) Mary leaves home.
- 2) She walks past the oak tree.
- 3) She walks past the post box.
- 4) She arrives at the grocery store.
- 5) She opens the door and enters.
- 6) She nods to the cashier.
- 7) She gets a bottle of milk from the cooler.
- 6') She pays the cashier for the milk.
- 5') She exits through the door.
- 4') She walks away from the grocery store.
- 3') She walks past the post box.
- 2') She walks past the oak tree.
- 1') Mary arrives home.

3 Types of Control

The idea of a revealed text raises an important question: To what degree did the Lord control the dictation of the Book of Mormon? There appear to be three possible kinds of control over the dictation of the text:

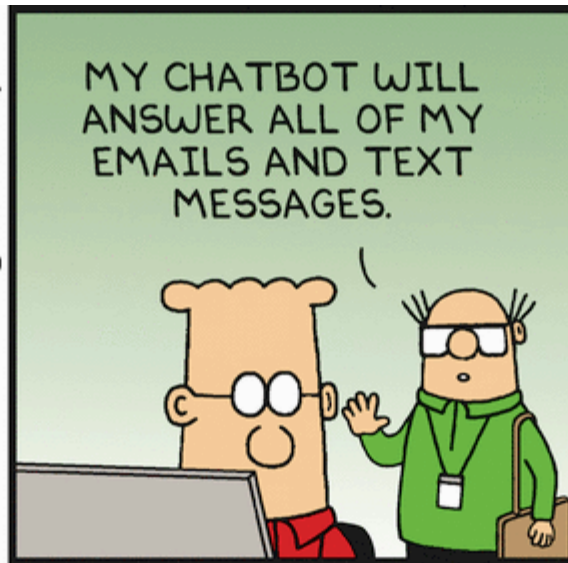
1. *Loose control*: Ideas were revealed to Joseph Smith, and he put those ideas into his own language (a theory advocated by many Book of Mormon scholars over the years);
2. *Tight control*: Joseph saw specific words written out in English and read them off to the scribe—the accuracy of the resulting text depending on the carefulness of Joseph and his scribe;
3. *Iron-clad control*: Joseph (or the interpreters themselves) would not allow any scribal error to remain (including the misspelling of common words).

One can also conceive of mixtures of these different kinds of control. For instance, one might argue for tight control over the spelling of specific names, but loose control over the English phraseology itself.

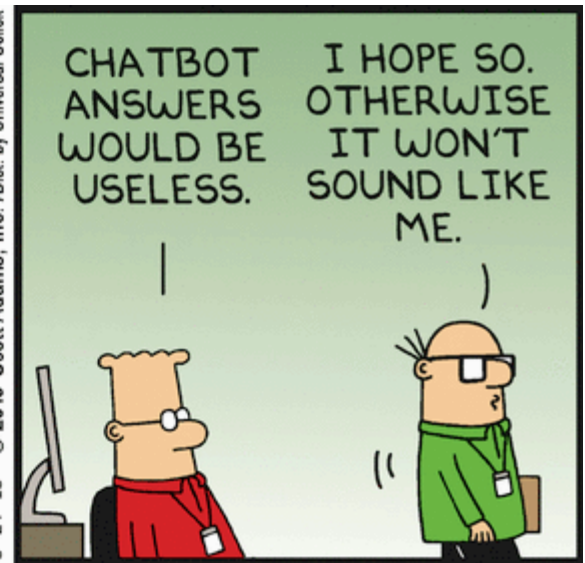
Speakers



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Speakers:

Principal – Author - Animator

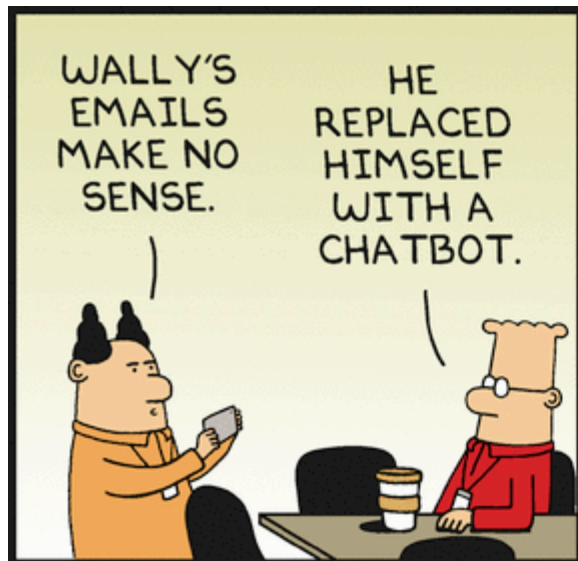
In canonical talk, one of the two participants moves his lips up and down to the accompaniment of his own facial (and sometimes bodily) gesticulations, and words can be heard issuing from the locus of his mouth. His is the sounding box in use, albeit in some actual cases he can share this physical function with a loudspeaker system or a telephone. In short, he is the talking machine, a body engaged in acoustic activity, or, if you will, an individual actor in the role of utterance production. He is functioning as an "animator."

Animator and recipient are part of the same level and mode of analysis, two terms cut from the same cloth, not social roles in the full sense so much as functional nodes in a communication system.

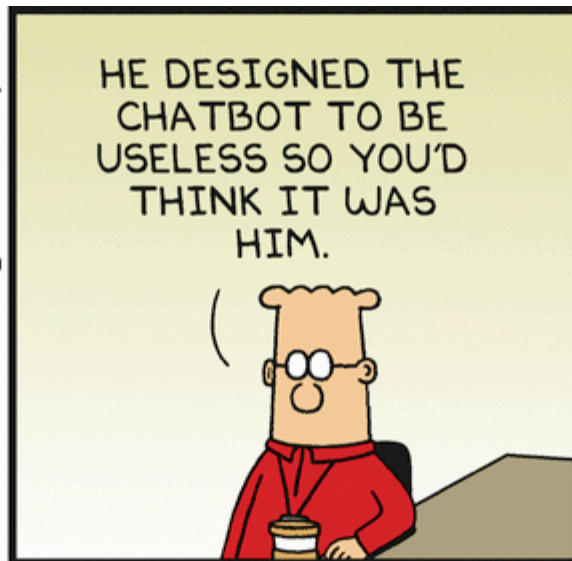
But, of course, when one uses the term "speaker," one very often beclouds the issue, having additional things in mind, this being one reason why "animator" cannot comfortably be termed a social role, merely an analytical one.

Sometimes one has in mind that there is an "author" of the words that are heard, that is, someone who has selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded.

Sometimes one has in mind that a "principal" (in the legalistic sense) is involved, that is, someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say.



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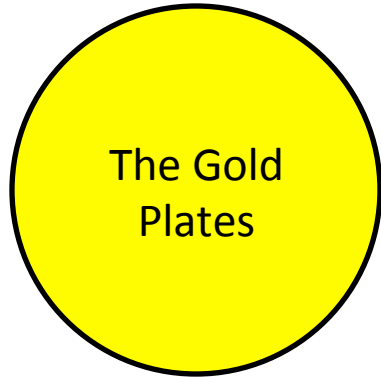


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There is something fairly obvious about translation being a double act of communication. Being at the receiving end, I want to read the new novel by Mo Yan, but I am unable to read Chinese. Therefore, somebody must have read the novel before me, and this must have been a person who can understand Chinese. It must also be a person who can write my language.

This person, then, is at the receiving end of one process of communication, but at the start of another process. What makes this model more useful for understanding translation than earlier models, however, is the ideas about communication as such which I have presented above that the receiver is an active subject, who must concretise the artefact produced by the receiver into a percept; ... The translator is a doubly active subject, as interpreter and as creator of a new text. He or she is the receiver of one act of communication and the sender of another one. He or she first has to transform the artefact into an object of his/her own experience. This is a process that cannot be described as encoding, with any intentional depth of the word, because this term suggests a simple exchange of one coded item for another. The correspondence often has to be at a much higher level of understanding.



Loose Control

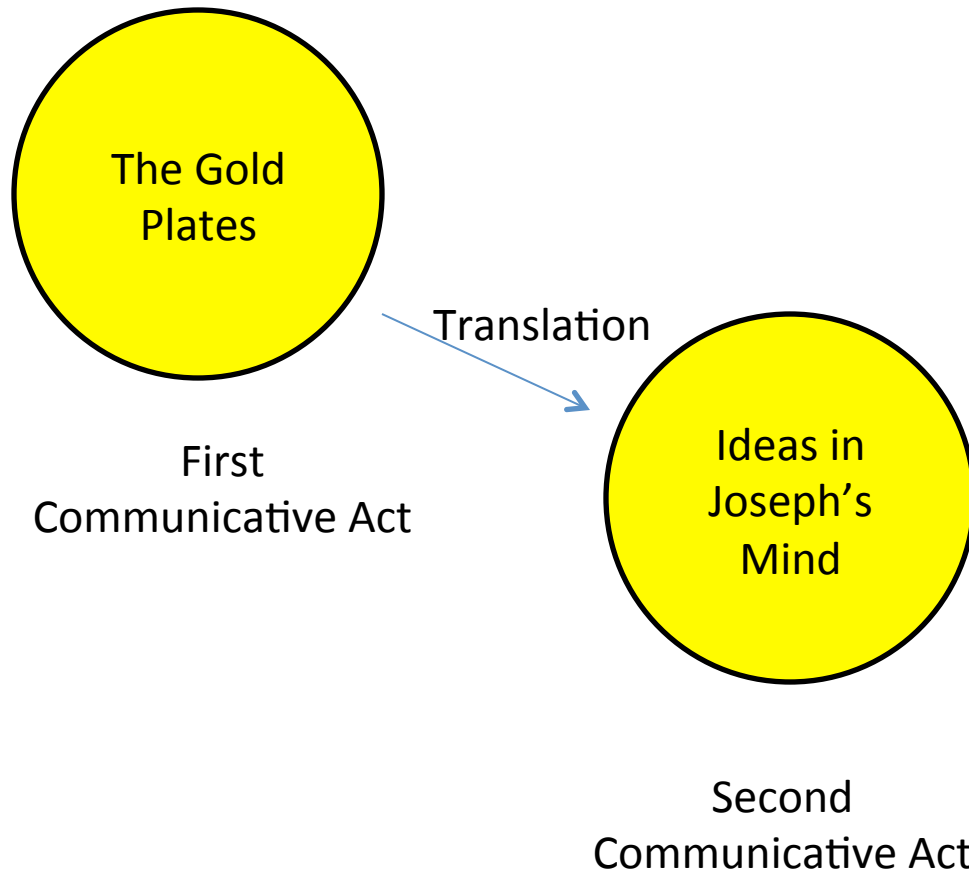
First Communicative Act

Principal: original writers (Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, Moroni, etc).

Author: original writers (except when quoting source documents verbatim)

Animator: original writers

Loose Control

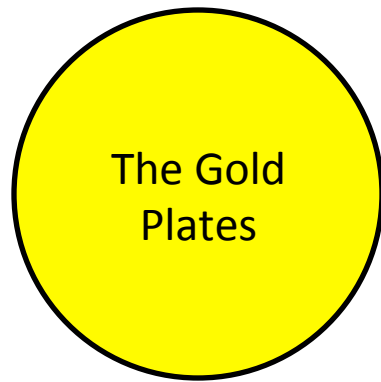


Principal: original writers

Author: ??

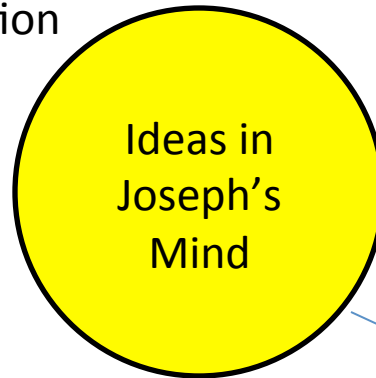
Animator: ??

Loose Control



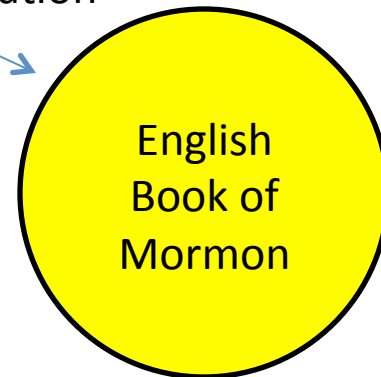
The Gold
Plates

Translation



Ideas in
Joseph's
Mind

Translation



English
Book of
Mormon

First
Communicative Act

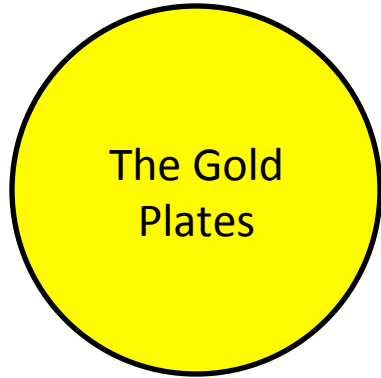
Second
Communicative Act

Third
Communicative Act

Principal: original writers

Author: Joseph Smith

Animator: Joseph Smith



Tight Control

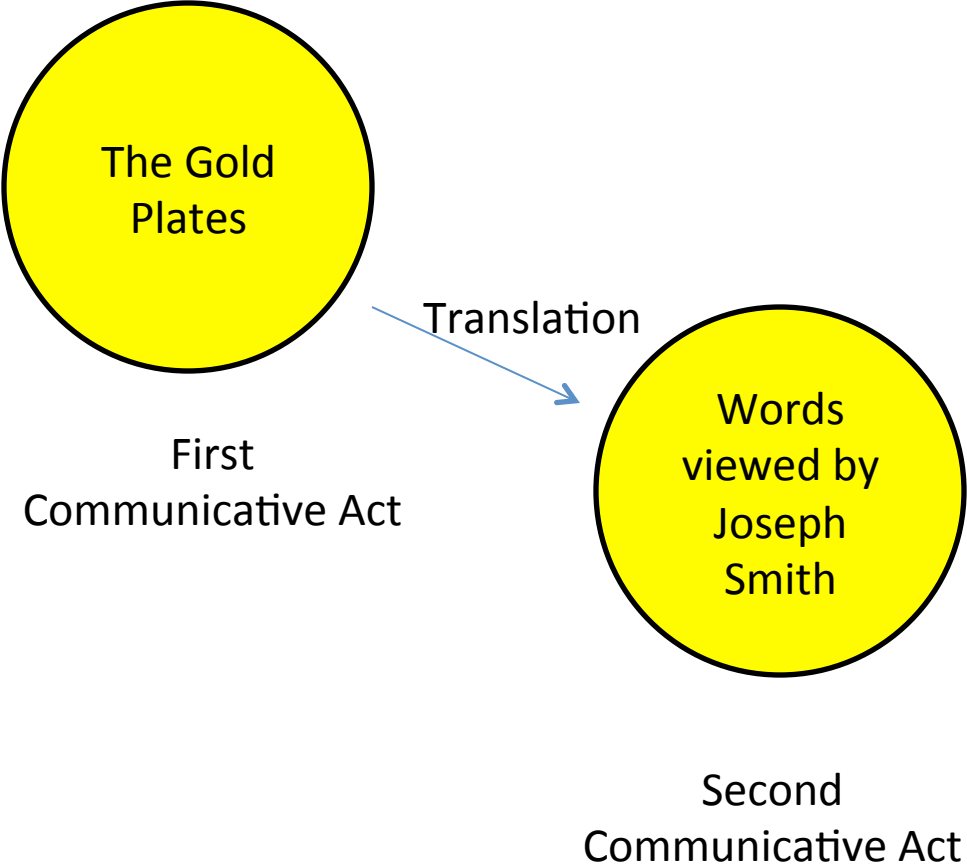
First Communicative Act

Principal: original writers (Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, Moroni, etc).

Author: original writers (except when quoting source documents verbatim)

Animator: original writers

Tight Control



Principal: original writers

Author: ??

Animator: ??

The Audience

A translated text , whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text - the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the "original." The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator's effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning. What is so remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's crucial intervention in the foreign text. The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text.

many of the translation activities which led to new developments and changes in Chinese culture were initiated or undertaken by non-Chinese people. For their work to be effective, they had to have sufficient knowledge of China's contemporary needs to be able to properly place both themselves and their work within this host culture.

The translator ought always to figure to himself, in what manner the original author would have expressed himself, if he had written in the language of the translation

Rabassa's translation is a triumph of fluent, gravid momentum, all stylishness and commonsensical virtuosity.

His first four books published in English did not speak with the stunning lyrical precision of this one (the invisible translator is Michael Henry Heim).

Helen Lane's translation of the title of this book is faithful to Mario Vargas Llosa's—"Elogio de la Madrastra"—but not quite idiomatic.

The Samurai, a transparent roman à clef, fluently translated by Barbara Bray, chronicles Ms. Kristeva's—and Paris's—intellectual glory days.

In Stuart Hood's translation, which flows crisply despite its occasionally disconcerting British accent, Mr. Celati's keen sense of language is rendered with precision.

Often wooden, occasionally careless or inaccurate, it shows all the signs of hurried work and inadequate revision. [...] The Spanish original here is 10 words shorter and incomparably more elegant.

An attempt has been made to use modern English which is lively without being slangy. Above all, an effort has been made to avoid the kind of unthinking "translationese" which has so often in the past imparted to translated Russian literature a distinctive, somehow "doughy," style of its own with little relation to anything present in the original Russian.

He is solemnly reverential and, to give the thing an authentic classical smack, has couched it in the luke-warm translatese of one of his own more unurgent renderings.

Paralysing woodenness ("I am concerned to determine"), the dull thud of translatese ("Here is the place to mention Pirandello finally") are often the price we more or less willingly pay for access to great thoughts.

written in English that is current (“modern”) instead of archaic, that is widely used instead of specialized (“jargonisation”), and that is standard instead of colloquial (“slangy”). Foreign words (“pidgin”) are avoided, as are Britishisms in American translations and Americanisms in British translations. Fluency also depends on syntax that is not so “faithful” to the foreign text as to be “not quite idiomatic,” that unfolds continuously and easily (not “doughy”) to insure semantic “precision” with some rhythmic definition, a sense of closure (not a “dull thud”). A fluent translation is immediately recognizable and intelligible, “familiarised,” domesticated, not “disconcerting[ly]” foreign, capable of giving the reader unobstructed “access to great thoughts,” to what is “present in the original.

The linguistic fingerprint of the Book of Mormon, in hundreds of different ways, is Early Modern English. Smith himself — out of a presumed idiosyncratic, quasi-biblical style — would not have translated and could not have translated the text into the form of the earliest text. Had his own language often found its way into the wording of the earliest text, its form would be very different from what we encounter.

A large amount of textual evidence — and the foregoing discussion contains only a sliver of it — tells us that Joseph Smith did receive and read a revealed Early Modern English text. Understandably, he may not have been fully aware of it

As has been demonstrated so many times,
translations which deviate from sanctioned
patterns — which many of them certainly do
— are often tolerated by a culture to a much
higher extent than equally deviant original
compositions.

Reading Through the Lens of Translation

Some Concluding Thoughts

When God speaks to the people, he does it in a manner to suit their circumstances and capacities. ... Should the Lord Almighty send an angel to rewrite the Bible, it would in many places be very different from what it now is. And I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be rewritten, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation.