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Theories of Book of Mormon Translation

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Abstract: For the Saints who participated in or witnessed the translation of the Book of Mormon, the most important aspect of the translation was the very fact that it happened. They didn't spend time questioning linguistic issues of translation. It was more than sufficient that the translation was a miracle and that they had witnessed the miracle of the opening of the heavens in their day.

Theories of Book of Mormon Translation

The Early Inerrant Theory of Translation

For the Saints who participated in or witnessed the translation of the Book of Mormon, the most important aspect of the translation was the very fact that it happened. They didn't spend time questioning linguistic issues of translation. It was more than sufficient that the translation was a miracle and that they had witnessed the miracle of the opening of the heavens in their day.

It is therefore not surprising that the descriptions they gave of the translation method emphasized its divine and miraculous nature. Consonant with the popular attribution of inerrancy to the Bible, their descriptions paint the process as inerrant.¹ Martin Harris (in a reminiscence recorded in 1881) described the translation without using the word *inerrant*, but certainly invoking the concept: "By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say, 'Written,' and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used."² In 1907, Samuel Whitney Richards recorded an interview he had with Oliver Cowdery in 1849. According to his report of Oliver's description: "Every word was made distinctly visible even to the very letter, and if Oliver did not in writing spell the word correctly it remained in the translator until it was written correctly. This was a Mystery to

¹See Chapter 11, "The Creation of a Sacred Communal Story," for a discussion of how so many witnesses would converge on the same description, even if that description did not reflect reality.

²"Martin Harris, As Recorded by Edward Stevenson (1881)," in John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson, eds., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, 135; "Martin Harris Interviews with Edward Stevenson, 1870," in Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:320–21.

Oliver, how Joseph being compar[a]tively ignorant could correct him in spelling, without seeing the word written.”³

These statements treat the translation as a divinely produced, divinely perfect rendition of the plate text; a precise representation of what God intended should be written. Royal Skousen, professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, summarizes the evidence from the manuscripts for the Book of Mormon compared to the witness statements: “Most of the witnesses believed that Joseph Smith or the interpreters had some ability to know what the scribe was writing. They may well have occasionally observed Joseph Smith correcting the scribe without directly looking at the manuscript. Yet this interference was not automatic, nor did it prevent the scribe from making mistakes.”⁴ Because this theory presupposes the absence of error and Skousen’s work makes it clear that errors occurred, an inerrant translation is simply not a supportable option to explain the translation of the Book of Mormon.

In the Language of the Prophet

Although most of the witnesses to the translation adopted an inerrantist view, Brigham Young clearly did not: “Should the Lord Almighty send an angel to re-write 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 re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation.”⁵

Many modern LDS scholars have followed Brigham’s idea and suggested that the translation consisted of some conceptual connection to the plates that did not extend to precision in the selection of words or grammar.⁶ One of the most vocal and careful proponents of this view was B. H. Roberts:

³“Oliver Cowdery, As Interviewed by Samuel Whitney Richards (1907),” in Welch and Carlson, *Opening the Heavens*, 144; “Oliver Cowdery Interview with Samuel W. Richards, January 1849,” in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:501.

⁴Royal Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” 82.

⁵Brigham Young, July 13, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:311.

⁶John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, “Book of Mormon Translation by Joseph Smith,” 1:212, “Regarding the nature of the English translation, its language is unambiguous and straightforward. Joseph once commented that the book was ‘translated into our own language.’ In several chapters, for good and useful reasons, this meant that the language would follow the King James idiom of the day. It also assured that the manuscript would contain human misspellings and grammatical oddities, implying that if it had been translated in another decade its phraseology and vocabulary might have been slightly different.” Internal

The view of the manner of translating the Book of Mormon here set forth furnishes the basis of justification for those verbal changes and grammatical corrections which have been made since the first edition issued from the press; and would furnish justification for making many more verbal and grammatical corrections in the book; for if, as here set forth, the meaning of the Nephite characters was given to Joseph Smith in such faulty English as he, an uneducated man, could command, while every detail and shade of thought should be strictly preserved, there can be no reasonable ground for objection to the correction of mere verbal errors and grammatical construction. There can be no reasonable doubt that had Joseph Smith been a finished English scholar and the facts and ideas represented by the Nephite characters upon the plates had been given him by the inspiration of God through the Urim and Thummim, those ideas would have been expressed in correct English; but as he was not a finished English scholar, he had to give expression to those facts and ideas in such language as he could command, and that was faulty English, which the

references silently removed. According to E. Cecil McGavin, *An Apology for the Book of Mormon*, 16, "It is evident that the Prophet Joseph Smith did not see English sentences appear upon the Urim and Thummim, neither did he hear a voice dictating the meaning of the original characters. He simply was inspired as to the meaning of the Nephite writings, but was left to himself to express those ideas in his own words. The language of the Book of Mormon is the language of Joseph Smith, not the language of Deity or of the angelic messengers." I should note that, contrary to McGavin's assertion, there is considerable evidence that Joseph did see words and that he read them to the scribes.

Dan Vogel, "'The Prophet Puzzle' Revisited," 60, sees the same process but denies that any actual translation was occurring: "Regardless of the outcome, the revelation hints that Smith privately held a definition of translation and revelation that was more liberal than that of many of his followers, one which is so internal that the seer stone and the plates become mere props. Of course, Smith encouraged the view that he was simply reading the God-given translation from his stone when actually he was working the words out in his mind, dictating the words he felt good about and forgetting those not worth remembering. In Smith's view, the words were inspired regardless of their true origin."

James E. Lancaster, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon," 108, notes: "The inspiration Smith received involved general concepts rather than literal information. Smith had to express in his own words and phrases the concepts which passed through his mind." Robert F. Smith, "Translation of Languages," 9, states: "The old word-for-word plenary dictation theory of the translation of the Book of Mormon (i.e., words coming directly from God, with no intermediate process), which is accepted in some circles for both the Bible and Book of Mormon even today, is not based on an objective appraisal of the evidence. For neither D&C 8&9 nor the Book of Mormon itself allow for such a mechanical readout." Paul E. Dahl, "Theories of the Origin, Translation Process and Publication of the Book of Mormon," 12, comments: "It is difficult for this writer to accept the book of Mormon as being a 'literal translation,' that it was translated word for word and letter for letter from the Nephite language into English."

Prophet himself and those who have succeeded him as custodians of the word of God have had, and now have, a perfect right to correct.⁷

Roberts's explanation does not discount the Book of Mormon as a translation but posits that the vocabulary and syntax were artifacts of the translator and not dictated by specific vocabulary and syntax on the plates, or by a divine translator's dictation.

The less-than-inerrant, less-than-literal picture of the translation has acquired several adherents, but it is an uneasy acceptance. There is, along with the discussion of the translation method, a need to affirm the divinity surrounding the translation. Therefore, when John A. Widtsoe provides a similar description of the translation process, he adds a caveat to preserve some of the mystery in the language:

It was not a word-for-word translation. As nearly as can be understood, the ideas set forth by the characters were revealed to the Prophet. He then expressed the ideas in English as best he could; that is, the language of the English Book of Mormon is to a large degree the language of the Prophet as used in his every day conversation on religious subjects, but brightened, illuminated, and dignified by the inspiration under which he worked. It must be said, however, that the vocabulary of the Book of Mormon appears to be far beyond that of an unlettered youth.⁸

Widtsoe proposes that the vocabulary and syntax were Joseph's, but that Joseph's language had been elevated above his quotidian speech by the sacred task at hand. It was Joseph, but "far beyond" Joseph. This explanation retains the element of divinity in the translation.

Yet Widtsoe seems to have found the suggestion that Joseph provided the vocabulary and syntax a two-edged sword. While it explained errors and modern phrases, it simultaneously detracted from the mystery of the text. The potential problem of a conceptual translation is that the translation might be posited as so conceptual that it is no longer seen as tied to the plate text. M. Deloy Pack outlined the problem in his 1973 master's thesis, written at Brigham Young University:

⁷Brigham H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 2:145–46. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 174, gives a similar explanation for the language used in the revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants: "The revelations were not God's diction, dialect, or native language. They were couched in language suitable to Joseph's time. The idioms, the grammar, even the tone had to be comprehensible to 1830s Americans."

⁸John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God*, 42.

This conceptual theory of translation is more appealing to a twentieth century mentality and the fact that Joseph Smith could translate without the plates being present might be used to support the idea that there was no correlation between the characters in the original and the words of the translation but only a correspondence of ideas or concepts on a much broader level. In such a case one would not expect to find any Hebraic influence on the translation. Taken to its extreme, this position would do away with the need for any writing or plates. The Prophet could simply have been inspired to think in English thoughts corresponding to those which had occurred anciently to the Nephite historians without the need to see their writings at all.⁹

The most extreme version of a conceptual theory of translation would make the plates extremely remote and essentially unrelated to the English text. It might even suggest that it was not really a translation, but simply a story based on real events.¹⁰

The danger of that slippery slope argument is apparent in the way Widtsoe applied the brakes by declaring Joseph's text "far beyond" his normal capabilities. That same desire to set the brakes while accepting some distance between the plate text and the translation can be seen in Robert Millet's description of the process:

We need not jump to interpretive extremes because the language found in the Book of Mormon (including that from the Isaiah sections or the Savior's sermon in 3 Nephi) reflects Joseph Smith's language. Well, of course it does! The Book of Mormon is translation literature: practically every word in the book is from the English language. For Joseph Smith to use the English language with which he and the people of his day were familiar in recording the translation is historically consistent. On the other hand, to create the doctrine (or to place it in the mouths of Lehi or Benjamin or Abinadi) is unacceptable. The latter is tantamount to deceit and misrepresentation; it is, as we have said, to claim that the doctrines and principles are of ancient date (which the record itself declares) when, in fact, they are a fabrication (albeit an "inspired" fabrication) of a nineteenth-century man. I feel we have every reason to believe that the Book of Mormon came through Joseph Smith, not from him.

⁹M. Deloy Pack, "Possible Lexical Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon (Words of Mormon-Moroni)," 29.

¹⁰While it doesn't count as a theory of translation, some suggest that the Book of Mormon is an important moral book, unaccompanied by a need to see it as the translation of an ancient document. This is an attempt to see the text as modern but inspired, perhaps not too far removed from the most extreme version of the conceptual translation model. Anthony A. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture," 1–19, is an example of this approach.

Because certain theological matters were discussed in the nineteenth century does not preclude their revelation or discussion in antiquity.¹¹

Millet is willing to see a distance between the vocabulary and syntax of the plate text and those of the translation, but he stops when it comes to “doctrinal” concepts. Millet emphasizes that the text really is a translation and that, despite the sometimes modern vocabulary, it can be relied upon when it discusses “doctrine.” That analysis correctly emphasizes the religious value of the text. However, it doesn’t help define the nature of the relationship. Instead Millet bounds the relationship with a “thus far, no farther” limit rather than a more specific definition.

As we examine the evidence available, we will look for examples that not only demonstrate this type of translation, but that may allow us to more fully define it. If the translation is less-than-inerrant and also less-than-literal, we need to define the bounds of the conceptual distance between plate text and English translation.

Royal Skousen’s Theory of the Translation

Royal Skousen’s masterful work on the manuscripts of the Book of Mormon has placed him in a unique position to comment on the words that comprise the Book of Mormon. His examination of the manuscripts and printed editions has led to important breakthroughs in our understanding of the history of the creation of the Book of Mormon text, beginning with the original dictation. Skousen’s work has cleared up some small textual issues that can now be shown to have occurred because of the transmission process from oral dictation to text, from original manuscript to printer’s copy, and from the manuscript to printed text.¹²

Skousen’s erudition in dealing with the text requires that we pay attention when he discusses his concepts of how the translation occurred. He has proposed a three-fold schema for defining different possible types of translation:

There appear to be three possible kinds of control over the dictation of the Book of Mormon text:

¹¹Robert L. Millet, “The Book of Mormon, Historicity, and Faith,” 5.

¹²An obvious example is the identification of the Amlicites and the Amalikes as the same people with simply a mishearing of the name creating the apparent difference. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, Vol. 4, Part 3, 1605–9.

1. *Loose control*: Ideas were revealed to Joseph Smith, and he put the ideas into his own language (a theory advocated by many Book of Mormon scholars over the years).

2. *Tight control*: Joseph Smith 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 Smith and his scribe.

3. *Iron-clad control*: Joseph Smith (or the interpreters themselves) would not allow any error made by the scribe to remain (including the spelling 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.¹³

Skousen's understanding of the translation process starts with Joseph and the interpreters but includes the scribes writing in the original manuscript:

On the basis of the witnesses' statements, we can identify the following stages in the translation process:

1. Joseph Smith sees (in some way) the English text,
2. Joseph Smith reads off the text to the scribe,
3. The scribe hears the text,
4. The scribe writes the text.¹⁴

This understanding of the process allows Skousen to examine the numerous places where alterations might have been made, including the mishearing of the spoken word before it was committed to writing on the manuscript. While such an approach is critical for understanding the text that was written, the scribe's role does not tell us how the English text relates to the plate text.

When Skousen turns to that question, he first discounts the iron-clad theory. He considers that it is disproven by the manuscript evidence. (See, for example, the discussion of spelling in Chapter 15, in the section "The Process of Translating Names.") Skousen also argues against the idea of loose control: "A number of writers have referred to D&C 9:8 in support of loose control: 'You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.' But the phrases 'study it out in your

¹³Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," 64–65. A revised version is Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," 24.

¹⁴Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 64; see also Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon," 24.

mind' and 'you shall feel that it is right' do not necessarily imply a loose control over the text. Joseph Smith had to 'study it out in his mind' till he got it right!"¹⁵

Skousen is more specific in countering arguments from B. H. Roberts, the most lucid of the advocates of a loose connection between plate text and translation:

One important question has been the origin of the ungrammaticality in the original text of the Book of Mormon: if we accept Joseph Smith's claim that the translation was inspired of God, do we have to accept the nonstandard forms as also coming from God? B. H. Roberts argued that such a claim would be tantamount to blasphemy:

If . . . it is insisted that the divine instrument, Urim and Thummim, did all . . . then the divine instrument is responsible for such errors in grammar and diction as occur. But this is to assign responsibility for errors in language to a divine instrumentality, which amounts to assigning such errors to God. But that is unthinkable, not to say blasphemous.

Of course, the implication of this argument is that if God had given the English translation word for word, then he would have given it in B. H. Roberts's proper English and not Joseph Smith's upstate New York dialect. It seems to me that since God is not a native speaker of English nor a respecter of tongues, he is perfectly willing to speak to his "servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24). In fact, internal evidence from the original manuscript as well as statements from witnesses of the translation provide strong support that the Lord exercised "tight control" over the translation process and that he indeed is the source for the original text of the Book of Mormon. From this perspective, Joseph Smith's editing for the second edition of the Book of Mormon may be viewed as translating the text into standard English rather than cleaning up grammatical errors.¹⁶

Clearly, Skousen does not consider it blasphemy, as did Roberts, to place grammatical errors in the divine court. Skousen argues that the premise of divine perfection is incorrect from the beginning. He sees such an approach as a reasonable example of God's adaptation to humankind.

¹⁵Royal Skousen, "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon," 55.

¹⁶Royal Skousen, "The Original Language of the Book of Mormon: Upstate New York Dialect, King James English, or Hebrew?" 31. Skousen makes a similar argument in "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon," 55–56. For B. H. Roberts's ideas about the translation, see his *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 1:253–311.

Skousen advocates what he calls tight control and has laid out his arguments in at least two different publications, using essentially the same logic in each. In each case, he examines the spelling of names and Hebraisms as his evidence for tight control over the text, to which he adds intertextual quotations in one article.¹⁷ This is important evidence that we must review before coming to any conclusion about the nature of the Book of Mormon's translation.

Analytical Categories for Examining the Evidence

Although Skousen's schema has become a de facto typology for discussing the nature of the translation,¹⁸ I find that it is not useful due to the particular definition Skousen gives to his idea of tight control, which refers to the transmission of the text from Joseph to Oliver, not from the plate text to English: "Joseph Smith saw specific words written out in English and read them off to the scribe—the accuracy of the resulting text depended on the carefulness of Joseph Smith and his scribe."¹⁹

Although that consideration is important, it is not properly a type of translation. In Skousen's definition, the English exists prior to Joseph's seeing it. Therefore, Joseph reads—but does not translate. Discussing whether Joseph was a reader or a translator is obviously important. However, regardless of the answer, *someone* made the translation. The question of how the English text relates to the plate text is the same whether Joseph or some other entity translated. Because Skousen's scheme best refers to transmission rather than translation, his schema is not useful in this discussion.

I suggest a slightly different three-fold set of analytical translation types: literalist equivalence, functional equivalence, and conceptual equivalence.

¹⁷Royal Skousen, "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon," 41–69, and Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 61–93. Skousen presents extra evidence of the intertextual quotations, following the work of John W. Welch, in this article.

¹⁸Dallin D. Oaks uses these terms as he describes the possibilities for how the text was translated in "Book of Mormon, Language of the Translated Text of," 118: "Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God, but it is not known precisely how the text was revealed to him in the translation process. More specifically, was the translation revealed to Joseph Smith in ideas that he wrote down in his own language (loose control over the translation process), or was it instead revealed to him word for word (tight control)? Or was it a combination of the two possibilities? Royal Skousen shows that there is some manuscript evidence to support the view of tight control of the translation process. In fact, Skousen's research into the manuscript history found some evidence suggesting that when Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon he had specific words provided to him."

¹⁹Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," 65.

Each of these terms describes a relationship between the target and the source languages, with each indicating a greater distance between the two.

A literalist equivalence closely adheres to the vocabulary and structure of the source language. It is essentially a word-for-word equivalence, understanding that there are times when syntax or semantics might require changes in the target language to retain sense. It differs from Skousen's iron-clad category in that there is no assumption of inerrant translation. It is more similar to the intent of his tight control category.

The next two categories represent a division of the concepts embodied in Skousen's loose control. Functional equivalence adheres to the organization and structures of the original but is more flexible in the vocabulary. It allows the target language to use words that are not direct equivalents of the source words, but which attempt to preserve the intent of the source text. This would be the category in which B. H. Roberts's theory of translation would fall.

Finally, conceptual equivalence is further from the source in that it no longer attempts to preserve specific structures or vocabulary in favor of transmitting the sense of the source. It is still tied to the source, but tenuously. Fewer of the features of the original show through in the translation. This category allows additions to the plate text that may preserve the original intent while still providing wholly modern additions. For example, in 1987, Blake Ostler argued for the presence of conceptual equivalence when he suggested that parts of the Book of Mormon represented an expansion of the plate text. He suggested that Joseph "provided unrestricted and authoritative commentary, interpretation, explanation, and clarifications based on insights from the ancient Book of Mormon text and the King James Bible."²⁰ These processes (should the data support them) would be more distant from the plate text than a functional equivalent and are best described as conceptual equivalence.

²⁰Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," 66.