MARTIN LUTHER'S GERMAN TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE – A POPULAR OR POPULIST APPROACH?

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Abstract*: The German Catholic monk Martin Luther (1483–1546), reformer and rebel, who created a schism in the Roman Catholic and Protestant/Evangelical churches, is also well known for his translation of the Bible from Hebrew (original: Old Testament) and Greek (original: New Testament) into German. In conflict with the then-head of the Roman Catholic Church, later even causing a dispute with the Pope and the Vatican because of its reform topics, he was guided by the premise that the Bible should be understood predominantly by the people, and not only by the clergy and the authorities. Luther's idea results in a German Bible translation that departs from the sacral Hebrew, Greek, and also Latin (Vulgate) language dogmas moving toward a linguistic interpretation that "looks into the people's mouths" ("Dem Volke aufs Maul schauen"). This kind of specific rendering leads Luther to break with tradition twice: firstly by using primarily the original linguistic codes and registers and secondly by breaking free from the sacramental function of the original Bible text by not translating literally (word-for-word), which was the case with previous German Bible translations. The paper highlights the fact that Luther's rendering of the Bible united the Germans linguistically and laid the foundations for the so-called German unitary language. In addition, the paper discusses whether the popularization of the German language in the Bible establishes greater proximity to the believers and may be viewed as a popular or even populist instrument.*

Keywords: Bible, German, translation, Martin Luther, popularism, populism

Introduction

The year 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of the "diachronic German Wende" within the Roman Catholic Church called the Reformation. This occasion raised many new questions and comparisons with the current political situation in Europe. The Reformation is closely linked to the German monk and theologian Martin Luther, and his translation of the Bible into vernacular German, pulling away from the then Western European language of the educated elites Latin, and coming closer to the public variety. The following paper raises the question, which has still not sufficiently been taken into account, whether the reformer Martin Luther was a means to the policy of the day, acting in a popular or even populist manner by using the Bible translation to evangelize the German common masses in order to reach and mobilize them to back him before setting the Reformation in motion against the Holy See in Rome.

1. Martin Luther – the German monk of the 16th century

Martin Luther (1483–1546), a German Augustinian monk and professor of theology, entered history by two extraordinary and rebellious achievements during his lifetime, causing a dramatic religious schism between the North of Germany and the rest of Europe (Eliade & Culianu, 1995):

a) Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*, posted on 31 October 1517 on the gate of the All Saints' Church (commonly known as the Castle Church) of Wittenberg, marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation

b) Luther's German translation of the Bible, historically anchored as *The Luther Bible*

c) Luther's Protestant Reformation and German translation of the Bible could not be taken into consideration without looking into the protest and reform against the Holy See in Rome. Reformation meant the return of a better past and restoration of the evangelical truth obfuscated by the Pope (Reinhardt 2017, 18-19). It was actually an act of separation of the German clergy from the Holy church in Rome, which was manifested by two aspects of decentralization:

Firstly, political decentralization from the Holy See by not recognizing the sole authority of the Pope and demanding more freedom for the believers by re-thinking clerical practices and concepts (e.g. paying *Ablass* (taxes) for committed sins in order to get forgiveness);

a) Secondly, linguistic decentralization from the Holy See by not accepting Latin as the only official sacral language of the Catholic Church.

b) The defence of Luther's Protestant ideas against the authorities in centralized Rome culminated in an acrimonious battle (Luther was called a "corruptible barbarian" in Rome (Reinhard 2017, p. 17)), since Luther insulted Pope Leo X, calling him a "Pope monkey" ("Papstesel", Schaede 2017, p. 10). The conflict finally resulted in divisions within the Catholic Church, leading to Protestant/Evangelical Churches in the North of Europe – and around the world – lasting until the present day.

2. Bible Translations from a Historical and Theoretical Point of View

It is kind of a miracle that the Holy Scripture was allowed to be translated from the "host-languages" (Steiner 2004 p. 7), Hebrew and Greek, into several languages closely linked to the Christian (and Jewish) religion, bearing in mind that every new target language meant a new interpretation and, consequently, a potentially new alignment, a "fork" on the path toward Christian belief. More importantly, the translation process of the Bible is ongoing – it does not end once a rendering is made into a certain target language. There is no final translation version of the Bible used in the different German churches at present. Each version becomes the subject of change after a period of time. Revisions and adaptations of Bible translations have become common practice over the centuries. The latest revision of the translation of Luther's Bible was completed in 2017, after a period of 33 years, the previous one having been completed in 1984.

The chronology of the Bible translations (OT, Hebrew Bible), or more precisely, interpretations, delineate a path into Aramaic (*Armaic Targums*), "the spoken language of the majority of the Jews at least from the sixth-fifth centuries BCE" (Shinan 2007 p. 1183), ancient Greek (*Septuagint (LXX)*, Talshir 2007 p. 1177-1182), Latin (from the old *Vetus Latina* to the new *Vulgate*), becoming the lingua franca in medieval times, and, in further consequence, a more individual language cycle of (Protestant) Bible translations during the Renaissance and the Reformation, which represent versions of the Bible in the main three European languages: the German *Luther Bible* (1522/1534), the French *Olivetan Bible* (1535), and the English *Geneva Bible* (1557/1560); "Geneva, the protestant Rome" (Schaede 2017, p. 15).

The translation of the Bible is undoubtedly the most famous example of a "sacral language" that has attracted the attention of translation studies ever since, because, as Stolze points out, "the Holy Scripture is not a usual book" (2000 p. 198) for many purposes. Due to the sacrosanctity of the Bible text, and the vehement political power of the institution "Holy See", the translation process sets high requirements on the translator(s) and imposes faithfulness to the original, especially in ancient translations, also known as the literal approach, or *verbum e verbo* (word-for-word) (Taylor 2007). This strategy inevitably produced unintelligible content for the believers/readers, which was manifested by the fact that the believers consumed the Bible's message, even though it was written in their own language, through a text form that does not reveal its meaning to them. It is remarkable that some scholars, such as Nida & Taber (1969), who generally favor a communicative target-culture-oriented translation technique, are not ready, when it comes to translating the Bible, to depart from the linguistic interpretation, entrusting the cultural adaptation and interpretation of the Bible text to a third theological instance – the exegesis (Prunč [4]2003), thus proclaiming that "it is the job of a pastor and teacher, not of the translator, to make the cultural adaptation" (Nida & Taber 1969, p. 134). Entrusting the cultural adaptation to a third party is reminiscent of the strict division of roles between readers of Scriptures and translators/interpreters (Shinan uses the term translators "called in Aramaic and Hebrew *Turgeman* or *Meturgeman*") of Targums, the

Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible, in the synagogues of the sixth-fifth centuries BCE, "preserving a clear distinction between the [original] written word of God and its oral interpretation" (Shinan 2007, p. 1184).

The situation started to change in the 16th century during the Reformation, when the centralized power of Rome began to lessen, and a more *sensus de senso* translation technique (Taylor 2007) became more predominant in Bible translations. Luther's Bible is probably the most exposed German translation of the Bible that demonstrates the first signs of following the *sensus de senso* technique, although it was not the first and, as we will see in the following section, not the last. The popularity of Luther's Bible is due to the unique translation technique and unique register of language that has been conveyed by Luther mostly from the original Hebrew (Old Testament) and original Greek (New Testament) language into German. Favourable circumstances were that Luther was a professional clergyman who was not only familiar with the content of the Bible, but also with both source languages (Hebrew and Greek), and the Bible relay language – Latin. A relay translation made only on the basis of the Latin *Vorlage*, or a purely second-hand translation, which seemed to be common practice in Bible translations – according to Nida, approximately 5-10% of the Bible translators knew Hebrew and ancient Greek (Prunč [4]2003, p. 126) – could be avoided in favor of having immediate access to the original language sources in addition to also taking account of the Latin version. According to Schneiders (2012), Luther used the Greek-Latin edition of Erasmus *Novum instrumentum omne* (1516) as the basis for his German translation of the New Testament. Despite Luther's solid knowledge of Hebrew, ancient Greek, and Latin, he received important support from his friend Philipp Melanchthon, who was supposed to be an expert on ancient Greek.

3. Luther's Bible Translation Premises

Despite the fact that Luther is mainly held responsible, prototypically, for the German translation of the Bible, he was not the first translator of the Holy scripture into German. There have been 19 German translations of the Bible before Luther's rendering, each of them adhering closely to the wording of the Vulgate, the new Latin version of the Bible by Jerome at the end of the 4th century. Luther realized that this artificial and alien language must be overcome by a language that would cognitively meet the public's scope. His programmatic motto for the register of language that he used in his Bible translation, published in the *Circular Letter on Translation/An Open Letter on Translating* (*Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*) in 1630, after having been criticized for the quite liberal translation of the New Testament, was defended with the following explanation:

»den man mus nicht die buchstaben inn der lateinischen sprachen fragen, wie man sol Deutsch reden, wie diese esel thun, sondern, man mus die mutter jhm hause, die kinder auff der gassen, den gemeinen man auff dem marckt drumb fragen, und den selbigen auff das maul sehen, wie sie reden, und darnach dolmetzschen, so verstehen sie es den und mercken, das man Deutsch mit jn redet.« (Luther, *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, p. 637)

It was fundamentally important for Luther to point out that – in contrast to his detractors, especially Hieronymus Emser ("the Catholic" translator of the NT into German, 1527), whom he polemically calls monkies (Esel), literally (Buchstabilisten) and papists (Papisten) – the language spoken by the common people, not the literal Latin words, should make sense, convey meaning, and should define the linguistic direction of the translation of the Bible. By liberating himself from the sacramental function of the original Bible text, and not translating literally (word-for-word), Luther moved toward a more linguistic interpretation and *eindeutschendes Übersetzen* (Schleiermacher) or *domesticating translation* (Venuti) (Prunč ³2012, p. 346) that "looks into the people's mouths" ("Dem Volke aufs Maul schauen") and speaks with the words of "the mother in the home, the children on the streets and the common man on the market" (Luther 1530).

Bearing in mind that in Luther's time, 80% of the German population was illiterate (Schneiders 2012), it was probably the only correct and wise objective of Luther's lingual strategy. The "crowd's/people's German", actually the East Middle German dialect (Ostmitteldeutsch), one of the five existing varietes of the *Neuhochdeutsch* at that time, favored by Luther in his Bible translation, understandably became very popular later on (ibid.) and developed into a supraregional form that served as the substratum for Standard German, the so-called *Hochdeutsch*.

The psychologically well-chosen technique by Luther to use the people's language as a medium to reach people can be compared to Nelson Mandela's translational credo that rests on the premise: "if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own, native language, that goes to his heart."

The importance of Luther's Bible is not measured only by its religious significance, but also by its linguistic impact, shaping to a great extent and unifying the German language that was spoken in many varying forms during his time. Contemporary *Hochdeutsch*, the German standard language, is rooted in Luther's Bible. Steiner highlights that the "Luther Bible was the active font of German" (2004 p. 7). This is not to say that German was underdeveloped as a linguistic code, rather that to a certain extent it was inconsistent and non-uniform. Luther's Bible posed a new linguistically-unifying starting point for German. In fact, Luther's biblical translation did not only unify, but it also enriched the German language by contributing numerous proverbs (e.g., *Wes das Herz voll ist, des geht der Mund über*) and lexical units (e.g. *Lückenbüßer*) that entered the German speaking area for the first time through the original Hebrew and Greek, and the relay Latin.

We can conclude that the German that is spoken in its present variety goes back to a "precodification" that was accomplished by Luther's Bible translation based on the people's German, a fact that is itself exceptional, and has been used as a norm for the standardization of discourses.

4. Luther's Bible Translation: A Popular or Populist Approach

The original version of Luther's Bible dating from 1522, (translation of the New Testament, the so-called "Septembertestament") and 1534 (translation of the Old and New Testament; full text) would not be understood by a present-day German native speaker. Luther's Bible is constantly being improved, adapted (published as *Biblia Deudsch*), and upgraded by the Evangelical Church, which is currently using the revised and adapted version from 2017, while the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church uses the 1984 version. The so-called *Einheitsübersetzung* ("unique translation") is used by the Catholic Churches in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Luxembourg.

The discrepancies and variations in the 1984 version of Luther's Bible, as compared to Luther's original translation, have been marked with the typographical symbol asterisk (*). For instance:

> „Kain aber sprach zu dem Herrn: Meine Strafe ist zu schwer, als daß
> ich sie tragen könnte*
> *Luther übersetzte: »Meine Sünde ist größer, denn daß sie mir
> vergeben werden möge.«"
>
> (Die Bibel, Luthertext 1984, 1. Mose 3.4., p. 6)

The constant synchronic linguistic adaptation of the Bible text reflects and captures the *zeitgeist* of the time interval during which the latest intervention was done. This may be defined as a popular approach to the modern reception of the Bible that seems to be a necessity in our digital era.

The historical aspect of the translation of the Bible rendered by Luther ought to be perceived along different lines. The question that arises is: How did Luther achieve the popularization of his Bible translation? Luther's feat was to accept and to use the vernacular German language that was spread among the people on the streets and markets. "The market became the main place for reformatory clearing up operations" (Schaede 2017, p. 11). That is not only a popular way of entering the hearts of the people, but it is also a populist way to psychologically enter their minds. According to Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, populism is "a kind of a mental map through which individuals analyse and comprehend political reality" (2017, p. 5) and it "always involves a critique of the establishment and an adulation of the common people" (ibid., p. 6). Luther's populism is combined with his concept for liberalization of the Catholic Church. By giving prominence to the people in a highly emotional manner, and using the people's language and contrasting the common man as a moral category against the corrupted elite of the Holy See, Luther challenged the established clerical system by (mis)using the common masses. Thus, in the final analysis, the Reformation became the "People's Movement with revolutionary traits" (Schaede 2017, p. 11).

We have to visualize that religion played an essential role in earlier times. People were afraid of the institutional power of the (Catholic) Church and of the supreme power and omnipotence of God. This was the momentum that the charismatic Luther

recognized. He was also aware of the fact that he would need the uneducated masses to succeed in his goal to separate his newly-established Protestant Church from the Roman Catholic Church, respectively the Holy See. That is why Luther's German translation of the Bible performs a double historical role:

a) The medium (especially his translation technique) to enrich and to unify the German people linguistically;

b) The platform to disseminate his new and different Protestant Christian beliefs and ideas among the German people;

c) An additional favourable condition from which Luther benefitted was the modern book printing technique going back to Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century, who had already printed the Latin Bible, and so facilitated the distribution of Luther's German Bible. This was the era of avant-garde book printing – which can be compared to the present-day digital revolution (Schaede 2017) – which inaugurated, in general, an affordable and liberal flow of information that goes beyond Church authorities. Luther shows admirable operational and strategic repartee by using the most innovative technical means of his lifetime (leaflets, handouts, Bible translation). According to the German historian Reinhardt (2017), in today's day and age, in order to continue communicating with his people, Luther would probably have 'tweeted'.

5. Conclusion

From the above, it can be seen that Luther's translation of the Bible into German was not rendered only for popular purposes, but also for populist ones. Namely, in order to complete the noble clerical separation of his Protestant ideas from the Catholic Church in Rome, Luther was aware that he could not succeed in carrying out such a huge undertaking without the support of the broad German population. He also knew that language is the best communicative tool that creates emotional proximity to the believers, and if one could find the right words, one could open and enter the people's hearts and, ultimately, succeed. The popular Bible translation based on Luther's translational credo: "to look into the mouths of the people" ("Dem Volke aufs Maul schauen") was presented in this paper as a means and a platform for the primary popularization of Luther's Protestant interests and for the dissemination of the unified German language, which may be viewed both as a popular, as well as a populist instrument.

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