

Found in Translation: Parsing and Appreciating Difficult Texts

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Overview | What are the limitations of translations? When and why is archaic or difficult language worth reading? In this lesson, students examine the language of the King James Bible by comparing it with two popular translations as a means of discussing why difficult texts are worth reading in their original language.

Materials | Computers with Internet access; copies of the handout **Three Versions of the Book of Genesis (PDF)**; and copies of texts and summaries of those texts from SparkNotes or the like.

Note to Teacher | You may wish to clarify for students that this activity involves looking at the Bible as literature, and as part of our culture, rather than for preaching or advancing any one religion.

Warm-Up | Give students this list of phrases from the King James Bible (without revealing their origin):

sour grapes

fatted calf

salt of the earth

drop in a bucket

skin of one's teeth

apple of one's eye

girded loins

feet of clay

pearls before swine

fly in the ointment

fight the good fight
eat, drink and be merry

Ask students if they know the source of these phrases. Once you have established that they all come from the King James Bible, ask the following questions: Is it surprising to you that all of these phrases come from the Bible? Why or why not? What do you tend to think about when you think of the language of the Bible? What does it say about the Bible and its role in our language and culture that these phrases are still in common use?

For a bit of fun to end the warm-up, assign pairs to “translate” one of the phrases above into contemporary English. Is there a contemporary equivalent? Or is the “oldie, the goodie” in this case? If pairs come up with a successful translation, ask the class to compare it to the original. Is anything lost in the translation? Gained? If so, what?

Related | In the Week in Review article “Why the King James Bible Endures,” Charles McGrath examines the lasting power and beauty of the language of the King James Bible:

But what we also love about this Bible is its strangeness — its weird punctuation, odd pronouns (as in “Our Father, which art in heaven”), all those verbs that end in “eth”: “In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth vp; in the euening it is cut downe, and withereth.” As Robert Alter has demonstrated in his startling and revealing translations of the Psalms and the Pentateuch, the Hebrew Bible is even stranger, and in ways that the King James translators may not have entirely comprehended, and yet their text performs the great trick of being at once recognizably English and also a little bit foreign. You can hear its distinctive cadences in the speeches of Lincoln, the poetry of Whitman, the novels of Cormac McCarthy.

Read the entire article with your class, using the questions below.

Questions | For discussion and reading comprehension:

1. How many people worked on the King James Bible? How long did it take them?
2. Why are translations – especially of sacred texts – often controversial?
3. What elements contribute to the King James Bible being “one of the masterpieces of English prose”?
4. Why is the King James Bible “deliberately archaic” in its grammar?
5. How is this different from many contemporary translations of the Bible? What cultural trend does it reflect?

Activity | Tell students that they will be looking closely at the language of the King James Bible by comparing it to two “translations.” Distribute the handout **Three Versions of the Book of Genesis (PDF)**, which includes text from three different versions of the first 10 verses of Genesis: the King James, SparkNotes and Contemporary English Version (CEV).

Then ask three different students to read the texts aloud.

Ask the following questions for discussion:

What differences do you notice in how these three texts sound?

What do you notice about the language of each that is responsible for the different sounds?

How well does the language of each suit its purpose?

What appeals to you about the translations? Why?

What does the King James version offer that the others do not? (In other words, what is lost in translation?)

What are the rewards of reading the more difficult original text?

When and how might a summary or modern translation be valuable?

Why do English teachers encourage students to read actual books, rather than summaries?

In what way does the reading experience count as much as the reading material?

Next, talk briefly about the purposes of each version, circling back to what the article says about why the King James version was created and why students think the SparkNotes and CEV versions exist.

Finally, tell students to read the three versions again, independently, and make notes in the margins about what they notice in terms of language – ask them to look at sentence structure, punctuation, vocabulary and poetic devices, as well as rhythm and voice. What do they notice about the language? Invite students to share their observations aloud.

Explain that they will delve more deeply into the issues raised today in an independent activity.

Going Further | Students do one of the following activities, using a text currently under consideration in the course.

Activities to do with texts written in an earlier time period:

Translate the text into contemporary English, “teen speak” or slang, and reflect on these questions: Which words or phrases in the original become obsolete or scarce in contemporary literature? How might cultural nuances be offered by those words or phrases? For any of the words you replaced, is there a single word that offers the same meaning, or the same nuance of meaning? What do you think is lost or gained in your translation? This works particularly well for Shakespeare, Chaucer or Victorian novels and poems.

Look at the SparkNotes summary of an excerpt of the text and compare it with the original, then reflect on what is lost in the summary, like meaning and humor, why people use guides like SparkNotes, and why the original text is worthwhile to read. Is anything gained? If so, what? They can also share their thoughts on our related Student Opinion question, [Do You Use Study Guides?](#)

Activities to do with modern or contemporary texts:

Look back at their notes on the language of the King James Bible and use what they discovered about its structure, grammar, syntax and vocabulary (repetition, “eth” verbs, anaphora) to translate an assigned piece of their classroom text into King James. They then read aloud from their work, in order, in a future class. Does this work for this particular text? Why or why not?

Take, in the spirit of “going backwards,” a pop or rap song and “translate” it into standard academic English, as the Queens English 50c does, reflecting on what is gained and lost in the translation.

Standards | This lesson is correlated to McREL’s national standards (it can also be aligned to the new Common Core State Standards):

Language Arts

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.
6. Uses skills and strategies to read a variety of literary texts.
7. Uses general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts.
8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Behavioral Studies

1. Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior.
3. Understands that interactions among learning, inheritance, and physical development affect human behavior.

Arts and Communication

4. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication.

Life Skills: Working With Others

1. Contributes to the overall effort of a group.
4. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills.

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