

## **Bridging the Sacred: Communicative Efficacy in Modern Translations of John through Relevance Theory**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to explore the communicative efficacy in contemporary translations of the Gospel According to John (Chapters 1–3) using Gutt’s relevance theory, a framework that views translation as interlingual interpretation. By analysing three English translations—the New International Version (NIV), English Standard Version (ESV), and The Message—the study explores each version’s effectiveness in conveying the original text’s intent to modern audiences. Relevance theory, with its focus on cognitive environments and secondary communication, provides a structured approach for comparing how each translation adapts John’s message to diverse reader contexts. This research outlines the evolution of Bible translations from author-focused to audience-centred approaches, revealing how sociocultural relevance drives new interpretations. Through a communicative lens, the analysis contrasts the Greek original with its English counterparts, examining differences in stimulus, cognitive environment, and interpretation. The study illustrates how relevance theory can serve as a cohesive framework for understanding translation philosophy and demonstrates the importance of aligning sacred texts with contemporary linguistic and cultural settings.*

**Keywords:** *Relevance theory, translation studies, communication analysis*

### **1. Introduction**

The Bible has been translated into different languages from the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Bible translations have a long and complex history shaped by linguistic, cultural, and theological developments. The present study investigates the relevance of communication in the art and practice of translation. Bible translations are perpetually growing with the increasing number of new translations and because of the new words added into language at regular intervals. These translations claim in their prefaces to be more communicative and faithful. There is a lack of standard assessing methodologies, which provides the impetus for this research. Therefore, Ernst-August Gutt’s relevance theory is a communication-based translation theory applied in this research to select translations of the Bible as the primary texts (Gutt 2014: 65). The present paper focuses on comparing, analysing and assessing the three different translations of the Gospel According to John (henceforth John). The three translations used in this study are the *English Standard Version* (2016), the *New International Version* (2011) and *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (2002) (hereafter referred to as *The Message*).

Translation as a communicative act has to be primarily understood beyond its linguistic aspects alone (Gutt 2014: 68). Each text is produced within a cognitive environment and even more so while producing a translation. The original interpretation can be produced only when the translation process involves the transmission of the contextual information that was a part of the cognitive environment of the original audience: It is pertinent to accept that in translation “texts travel across time, space and different orders of indexicality” and must therefore be

“re-contextualized” (House 2015: 4). The translation of a text is a process of communication of meaning to trace the original tone and intent of a message.

Relevance is the field in which a translator identifies and negotiates the communication struggles concerning form and content. When different translation methodologies are applied, various translations of the same text are born. Susan Bassett (2002: 33) has rightly observed that “if a dozen translators tackle the same poem, they will produce a dozen different versions.”

### *1.1 The Gospel According to John*

The Gospel According to John (Εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Ἰωάννην) is one of the four canonical gospels in the Bible. It carries a structured account of the ministry of Jesus. The concluding verses set out the purpose of the text, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Scholars believe that John reached its final form around AD 90–110, although it contains signs of origins even dating back to AD 70 (Brown 1988: 7). Like the three other gospels, it is anonymous, although it identifies an unnamed “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:7) as the source of its traditions. Scholars such as Tasker consider that a Johannine community existed as the text is closely related to the three Johannine epistles in style and content. It is a stylistic and thematic match for the three Johannine epistles and, along with the Book of Revelation, is treated by most scholars as one body of Johannine literature. (Brown 1988: 78). John has also been studied for its historical and philosophical contributions in different cultures (Kanagaraj & Kemp 2002: 7). In such a context, the Gospel According to John is an appropriate choice. As John is an ancient text dating back to AD 90–110 (Tasker 1960: 5), the different possibilities of translating an ancient text for contemporary readers – whether academic, liturgical, devotional, or general readerships – may be analysed. As a text, John, according to scholars, belongs to different genres with poetic portions, discourse, biographical accounts and first-person narratives (Marshall 2006: 200). Hence, there is ample scope for analysing different aspects of the text in translation. Also, John has different kinds of audiences today, some with aesthetic intention, some on historical scholarship and others for devotional reading (Köstenberger 2003: 350). Even though it belongs to the gospel genre, it is widely claimed to be different from the other three gospels, which are referred to as the Synoptic gospels due to their similarity in content (Tasker 1960: 18). Hence within the Bible itself, John stands out for its peculiar qualities of narration, language diction and vocabulary. These features make the text particularly suitable for analysing how translators negotiate style, symbolism, and key theological terminology. The text is thus selected for its ancient origin, and for its wide readership and subsequently the variety of translations available.

### *1.2 Literature review*

Translation studies has developed through key phases: early linguistic theories (1950s–60s), cultural and functionalist turns (1970s–90s), and cognitive, technological, and sociological approaches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Research on translations generally investigates translated texts on different levels and of different kinds. Linguistic aspects of translation, corpus studies of translation, descriptive-historical studies and analysis of think-aloud protocols are some of the critical areas of research in translation studies. It calls for a re-definition of the theory and understanding of the phenomenon of translation. Translation analysis applies different theoretical frames or approaches such as subjective, hermeneutic, descriptive, postcolonial,

poststructuralist, postmodern, literal and discourse-based approaches on translated texts. Cognitive and corpus-based approaches now play a significant role (Saldanha & O'Brien 2014: 10). Various interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary interpretive perspectives are also applied to translation studies. Translation research takes the form of investigating the process involved and the translator's role from other disciplines ranging from the historical, socio-cultural and descriptive studies of actual translation products. Such studies also consider the synchronic and diachronic temporal dimensions and the inter-cultural context present in translations. Unlike the research on merely linguistic attributes, which lead only to general observations, contemporary research focuses on employing a particular frame in the larger frame of reference. These developments mark a shift from purely linguistic equivalence to functional, cultural, and cognitive models of translation. Such research investigations are systematic and have a self-reflexive nature in future translation research such as embracing the "thoroughly diverse branches of the social sciences and natural sciences, particularly the biological sciences and technical aspects of cognitive science" (Tymoczko 2005: 1089).

Within this historical development, Eugene Nida's work in the 1960s introduced functional and formal equivalence, an important early foundation for Bible translation theory. A range of Bible versions like the Good News Bible (GNB), which follows functional equivalence, and the New American Standard Bible (NASB), which follows formal equivalence, are available. The discussion on their relative merit is more or less a scientific accommodation of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century revision of the age-old free/literal dichotomy under discussion since ancient translators such as ST. Jerome and Cicero (Gutt 2014: 18)

The paradigm shift (Doty 2007: 6) Gutt brought about in translation studies was by applying relevance theory (originally forwarded by Sperber and Wilson in human communication) to translation theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 15). Relevance theory is based on the inferential model of communication and forwarded by H. P. Grice (1991: 13), and the focus is on translation as an interlingual interpretive use (Gutt 2014: 105). It originated in the 1980s (Sperber & Wilson 1986) and later entered Bible translation discussions through Gutt. It consciously differed from dynamic equivalence translation by reproducing not the meaning but the conditions for original interpretation – the stimulus, the cognitive environment and the communicative principle of relevance theory (Gutt 2014: 105). The identification and addressing of cognitive processes have led to inference-led interpretation. Gutt considers this a pre-requisite in the task of translation. Research in such a dimension results in the formulation of successful communication in translation. It also results in building a communicative paradigm for analysis.

In the relevance theory approach, the same stimulus can elicit a range of contextual assumptions which are more or less accessible, and the same cognitive effects can be more or less easily derived. In such a situation, the translator faces a conflict, i.e. the greater the effort of inference called for, the less rewarding the input will be to process. On the other hand, the less processing effort required, the more input processed and the greater the positive cognitive benefits derived from processing an input, the more relevant the input is to the individual. Relevance is, therefore, a comparative notion which cannot be quantified (Gutt 2014: 31).

Relevance theory considers translation an intentional act of communication. This model provides a sufficient framework for understanding the cognitive process in translation. The analysis of expectations and inferences in the formation of interpretation is also addressed. Relevance is assessed according to the cognitive and communicative principle of relevance. This is done by identifying the processing effort, the contextual implications, the strength of implicatures and the resultant interpretations. Research in translation must analyse the

possibilities of cognitive processes in order to influence future translation processes. This is rightly pointed out by Van Der Henst & Sperber (2004: 239):

The human tendency to maximise relevance makes it possible not only to predict some of the other people's cognitive processes but also to try to influence them—how indeed could you aim at influencing people if you had no way to predict how your behaviour would affect their thought?

Kevin Gary Smith (2000: 95–96) has proposed a practical and critical study of Gutt's approach of direct and indirect translation while addressing specific translation issues of figurative language, implicit information, ambiguity and gender-biased language. He discusses how supplementary material may assist readers, bridge the contextual gap between the source context and the receptor context by providing illustrations/footnotes in a direct translation or by explicating implicit information in an indirect translation.

On a different note, Harriet Hill (2006: 12) has applied relevance theory in a comparative study in which three versions of selected Bible passages were tested in the Adioukrou language of Ivory Coast. The first translation was only the text without footnotes or any background information. The second translation had extensive footnotes providing background information needed to understand the passages. The third was a translation with footnotes in which all the background information in the footnotes was woven into the text. These translations were then given to the local community. In the study conducted, the readers were asked to answer the questions about each of the three translations. The results implied that the footnoted version and the adaptation were more communicative than the first translation. Thus, context plays a vital role in communication using footnotes. It was concluded in the study that with proper awareness, unsophisticated readers could also obtain information from footnotes.

Stephen Doty, in his research, designed a test to examine how clear and intelligible translations are to an average Thai reader. These included a literal translation, a functional equivalence translation and a meaning-based translation. Three different stories from the Bible were tested using multiple choice questions. The questions were objective and allowed statistical evaluation and comparison of the three types of translations. The research findings provide considerable evidence about the limitations of not providing contextual information to its readers. The results reveal the effectiveness of a meaning-based translation to be higher than that of a literal translation. Thus, it emphasizes the need for additional material with each translation. According to Doty (2007: 85), “the need for supplementary materials to assist new Bible readers to understand the message is apparent.”

Hill and Doty have used different types of translations in order to assess the comprehension of the readers. The focus was on the response of the audience to different translations. The relevance of supplementary material was underlined by Doty (2007: 85). Hill (2006: 103) contends that such supplementary material supported by footnotes, when incorporated into the text, leads the reader to understand better the context. As observed earlier, Smith (2000: 178–89) used the theoretical construct of direct and indirect translation proposed by Gutt as a framework for practical application.

Similarly, Sang Zhonggang has researched translating implicit information using relevance theory. In literary translation, the translator is confronted with a large volume of implicit information whose features (graded communicability, context-dependence, the relation between the implicit information, text and context, etc.) (Zhonggang 2006: 45) limit

the communicability of literary texts in another context, so the translator of literary texts faces more difficulties in the translation. Zhonggang took Gutt's theory as an approach for translating the implicit information in literary texts and experiments with constructing an explanatory framework for translating the implicit information in literary texts. The framework of Zhonggang (2006: 45) is based on the notion that translation is a "clues-based interpretive use of language across language boundaries." He agrees with Gutt's theory that the central concern for a translator is to achieve successful communication. In such a context, even when it is difficult to achieve complete interpretive resemblance to the source text, the translator needs to search for adequate relevance to maintain successful communication. The relevance of the source text to the target audience may be weakened due to the contextual and linguistic differences. In these instances, the translator should aim to interpretively make the textual properties of the target text as similar as possible to those of the source text, adjusting the similarity of each set of text structures. Hence, any layer of the literary text that could impede the principle of relevance may be adjusted to achieve the resemblance of textual properties. Zhonggang's explanatory framework for translating the implicit information in a literary text is practically presented as an effective strategy. There are studies elucidating how readers interact with onomatopoeia in digital manga and how the relevance of these expressions influences their reading behaviour (Rohan et al. 2021: 71)

Recent developments in translation studies emphasize that meaning-making in translation is shaped by multiple constraints operating simultaneously. As Marais (2023: 117) notes, communicative intent emerges within a semiotic environment, and the translator must select and constrain available resources in ways that maximize the likelihood of successful communication. Relevance theory contributes to this understanding by offering a cognitive explanation of how translators and readers manage inferencing, processing effort and contextual effects. However, contemporary scholarship positions such cognitive constraints within a broader functionalist framework. As Nord (2023: 172) argues, the *skopos* – the intended function of the translation in its target context – determines translational decisions and provides the primary criterion for assessing coherence, adequacy, and communicative appropriateness. In functionalist approaches, relevance and communicative adequacy are operationalized through the translation brief, which defines the purpose, audience, and pragmatic needs of the target community (Meylaerts & Marais 2023: 2).

Accordingly, relevance theory in this study is not treated as a competing grand theory of translation but as a complementary explanatory model that illuminates the cognitive processes underlying interpretive use, inferencing and contextualization within the functional constraints established by *skopos* and brief. This aligns with current trajectories in translation theory, where cognitive and functional approaches are understood as mutually supportive rather than mutually exclusive. The present analysis therefore uses relevance theory to examine how readers process translational stimuli and derive contextual effects, while acknowledging that the ultimate evaluative framework for translation choices remains the functionalist notions of *skopos*, coherence, and communicative adequacy.

In this sense, relevance theory is employed here not to determine translational norms but to refine the understanding of how a translation's intended effects are cognitively achieved. Functional adequacy determines *what* a translation must accomplish for its audience; relevance theory helps explain *how* the audience processes the translational stimuli in order to achieve those effects. This dual-level conceptualization is consistent with recent integrative approaches in translation studies, where cognitive accounts of inferencing and effort–effect balance are

used to support, rather than replace, functionalist principles governing translation production and evaluation.

Assessment in translation studies considers both functional adequacy and the relationship between the original text and its translation. It also evaluates the relationship between the original text, its reception, the author's voice and the translator's role. It may deal with the external aspects of a translation which are macro-contextual or internal aspects which are micro-contextual (House 2015: 5). The external aspects have a social perspective, and the internal aspects deal with the cognitive processes involved in doing a translation. There are studies dealing with variability in metaphorical motion expression in original vs. translated texts across multiple levels of analysis (target domain, source domain, metaphorical mapping) and typological contrasts (Lewandowski & Özçalışkan 2024: 25).

Relevance theory and its assessment consider the cognitive processes in translation together with its socio-cultural context. It also evaluates linguistic, pragmatic, and functional dimensions of the translation. In such a context, research on building a communicative paradigm stands relevant. The present study focuses on the contemporary English translations of the Bible and its process of communication. Gutt's relevance theory calls for a translation to be self-sufficient in providing the readers with the context, stimulus and its interaction for an interpretation.

### *1.3 Research on Bible translation*

Research on Bible translation is generally a discourse on the theory and practice of different approaches worldwide. The Bible translation scenario until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was inclined to literal translations and “[n]obody had studied the task of Bible translation worldwide from the perspective of the receptor languages in an attempt to find solutions to the translators' dilemma” (Smalley 1955: 61). In the traditional translation model, missionaries were the primary translators, and the locals served a secondary role as “language helpers” (Ciampa 2010: 60). Earlier translation work was done by missionaries who learned the vernacular language and translated the Bible. Many of the pioneering tasks were making dictionaries and even scripts of many languages (Verghese 2014). Their concern was to develop literacy in the community. The degree of involvement of the local community in translation projects later increased significantly. This change throws light on the increasing role of the local communities in current Bible translation projects. The earlier dependency on a foreign translator is now seen as “marginalisation” (Ciampa 2010: 61) and subsequently, this has led to new translations and revisions being conducted. In recent times, the academic discussion has developed to the broader analysis of the translated text using social, cultural, linguistic, audience-related, and technological advancements.

The development of translation theories led to a phase where new translations and revisions of the Bible were undertaken. Additionally, the changing nature of languages and the need to be more communicative with the contemporary audience also motivate newer translations. Being communicative with the contemporary audience is a significant reason for multiple translations of the Bible. All translations seek to communicate the content of the text. The large variety of translations has produced a more comprehensive range of options for communicating with different readers. This provision of many translations leads to debates and discussions on communication. In such a context, a communicative paradigm for analysing translations is necessary. The objectives and application of communication are restricted to the discussions and debates in translation studies. Relevance theory is one of the

communication-based approaches to translation by Gutt. The study analyses the three English translations: NIV, ESV and The Message using the communicative paradigm on two levels: first is the cognition of the reader (Gutt 2014: 237) and second is the communication of the text (Gutt 2014: 238). Subsequently, the concept of communication is analysed in the contemporary translations of John 1–3.

Bible translation has become a global phenomenon, characterized by various methodologies that have led to numerous English translations. These translations fall into three main categories: literal, mediating, and paraphrastic – each with different degrees of adherence to their respective methods. No translation is perfect; all aim to communicate effectively with different audiences (Bell 2005: 45). Literal translations, such as the King James Version (KJV), New American Standard Bible (NASB), and English Standard Version (ESV), aim to be as close as possible to the original texts. Mediating translations, like the New International Version (NIV), balance literal accuracy with modern readability. Paraphrastic translations, including The Living Bible and The Message, adapt the text to contemporary language and idioms, making it more dynamic and accessible. The Good News Bible, for example, addresses the needs of those with lower levels of formal education, making standard translations more understandable (Bratcher 1971). This variety in translation philosophies highlights the ongoing effort to make the Bible accessible and meaningful across diverse audiences and cultures.

### 1.3.1. *Word-for-word approach: ESV in focus*

There was a general tendency to consider God’s word with reverence and so to consider each word as a container of meaning (Ryken 2003: 32). In such an understanding, the meaning may be altered or miscommunicated if not translated correctly in the target language. Such translations give importance to the form of the original language. Hence, as far as possible, the translators restrict the translation of the words in the same order, yet in a comprehensible manner. There are plenty of such translations already available in the domain. Word-for-word translation is also called literal translation and is considered the most accurate. There is a general assumption in such translations of providing the best accuracy possible. There are many Bible translations which are word-for-word. The NASB, the King James Version (KJV), the English Standard Version (ESV), and the New English Translation (NET) are all examples of word-for-word translations. One of the most common reasons why such translations are in high demand is because of the general understanding that the literal translation leaves no room for misunderstanding (Ryken 2003: 35). The claim is to preserve the meaning of the original text even in translation. Of the several literal translations, ESV is selected for the present study. It is also significant as it falls in the lineage of the KJV, which is widely accepted as representing the literal translation approach.

The ESV is a revision of the Revised Standard Version (RSV). It belongs to the literal translations with its claim of translating using the “essentially literal” (ESV 2016: ii) approach. It was originally published in 2001. It is written in contemporary English, yet readers still find that it reminds them of the KJV and RSV. It seeks to be true to the original words in order to be accurate. It seeks to avoid interpreting the original text by translating the words of the text instead of providing a mere summary or its sense. The translation is suitable for public reading and preaching. Scholars and laymen use it for both academic and devotional study. The problem with literal translations is that the original language may have words with different layers of meaning. Such a word may not be available in the target language and hence it leads to gaps in communication. The different meanings available to the translators are not available to the readers. Similarly, literal translation focuses on the words and not on the context in which

these were spoken. While translating the words carefully, the texts may not be fully comprehended without context.

### 1.3.2. *Thought-for-thought approach: NIV in focus*

There was the general assumption that when translated word-for-word, the text was not easily comprehensible. Some of the translations are thought-for-thought where the sense or the thought is given importance and not the words. Hence the translator tries to rephrase the thoughts of the author. In this approach, the meaning is sought to be reproduced. In such cases, it is convenient for the reader but requires effort on the part of the translator. There is also an element of the translator providing their meaning of the text, so this kind of translation is deemed as less accurate (Poythress 2005: 114). The focus in this approach is on the reader's understanding. All obstacles that the reader would generally face in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure are carefully eliminated from this translation.

The NIV published first in 1978 belongs to such a translation where the thought is communicated to the readers. The focus is on "broad modern English" (Preface ii) which is understandable to the entire international audience. It does not carry difficult words for the reader to be confused. It did not seek to be literal in word order, but to communicate in broadly understood English. Hence the focus is on the understanding of the people with a policy to update the translation regularly. The problem with thought-for-thought translations is that the process involves an element of interpreting for the reader. In order to increase the level of understanding, contemporary vocabulary is used. In such cases, the translation may result in losing the meaning of the original text. The translator's focus is on the reader; therefore, the text is only sought to be explained. While increasing the level of understanding, the text does not provide significant context which would have helped in complete understanding.

### 1.3.3. *Paraphrastic translation: The Message in focus*

The third approach is that of a paraphrase where the idea is retold for the sake of understanding. In this approach, there is freedom to summarize based on what is understood by the translator. There may be additions and deletions for the sake of communicating as well. In such translations, words are of secondary importance, the prime focus is for understanding the text. Such translations are easier to read and understand and do not require much effort from the reader.

A paraphrase translation of the Bible seeks to make the meaning of the text understandable to the reader. It may elaborate more on the context in a way designed to help the reader understand the passage better (Wilt 2014: 35). It can also be an adaptation to a culture or to a period. Therefore, a paraphrase is a restatement of a text or passage in other words that convey the meaning and may employ many more words to attempt to more completely describe the meaning of the words from the original language, thus enabling readers to readily detect further nuances of meaning they may otherwise find difficult to discern in a regular translation. This helps readers to easily perceive additional shades of meaning they might otherwise struggle to see in a standard translation. The focus of the translation is on easy comprehension and easily connects with the contemporary reader. The text is summarized, and in the process, additions and deletions are obvious to various degrees. The text is recontextualized for the reader. Hence the meanings differ when the original context is not provided.

The Message is one such paraphrastic translation of the Bible in English by Peterson from the original languages. It uses contemporary idioms to keep the language of the text “current and fresh and understandable” (The Message 2018: 1). Its publisher Navpress claims that Peterson’s work was later reviewed by prolific Old and New Testament scholars to ensure that it is accurate and faithful to the original languages. The translation was a response to make the text more interesting to old and new readers. The problem with this highly idiomatic translation is that the text is recontextualized for the contemporary reader. The idioms which are used are easily understandable for the contemporary audience but may not exactly convey the intention of the original. This can lead to the addition of information and interpretation. The text is immensely popular and has replaced literal and thought-for-thought translation for its easy understanding and the clarity it provides.

There are differing opinions among scholars and laymen. Scholars who are familiar with the original languages and who know the historical background find the literal translation approach more accurate as it does not summarize the translator’s opinion. Audiences which do not want to wait to dig for the meaning prefer a thought-for-thought approach, so that they can comprehend easily instead of trying to collect the background. Many times, the translator has to interpret the text for the convenience of the reader. This can possibly lead to limited understanding of the different meanings possible otherwise. Similarly, it may also be misunderstood by the translators. These options were seen as multiple ways for better communication. Each of the translations have sprawling claims to better communicate the text. The question remains as to which constitutes a better translation approach. In such a context, it is necessary to analyse these translations with respect to the criterion of communication. To this purpose, one translation from each of the approaches – namely, the ESV, NIV and The Message – is considered in the present study for analysis using relevance theory.

## 2. Comparative analysis

Effective communication depends on the cognitive effects produced when new textual information interacts with this environment, either by strengthening, modifying, or generating new assumptions. At the same time, the reader naturally seeks to minimize processing effort, and any translation that demands unnecessary mental work reduces communicative efficacy. The present study focuses on the three translations and their processes based on linguistic differences, cognitive effects, and processing costs. The analysis includes assessing the differences in the original audience, the secondary audience and the impact of these differences in interpretations. Identifying the background of the community in which the text is written is necessary for its interpretation (Gutt 2014: 105). In relevance theory, the mutual cognitive environment of the author and the audience forms the context in which interpretation occurs. This context may be traced in the language, culture and social system that the author and the audience had shared. Unless the context is provided, translation may even be interpreted differently (Gutt 2014: 106). Such a possible threat may be avoided by providing appropriate communicative clues and contextual effects. The struggle for understanding, guided by these cues, leads to the proper interpretation of the text. By systematically applying these relevance-theoretic concepts, the analysis evaluates the communicative efficacy of the selected verse through the lens of relevance theory. All Greek citations in this study are taken from the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (NA28) (Aland et al. 2012).

2.1. γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν *gennethe anōthen* (John 3.3)

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

- ESV: Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
- NIV: Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”
- The Message: Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”

The word γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν (*gennēthē anōthen*) has meaning at three levels in Greek. The first meaning is ‘from above’ or ‘from heaven’, second ‘from the beginning’ and third ‘born again’. Jesus uses this phrase to convey to Nicodemus that merely practicing the Law is not enough (as he is a Pharisee). John, the author, presents Nicodemus as confused. In this context, Jesus explains the new birth, i.e. birth in the spirit. Given the range of inferences, Nicodemus initially understands it as being born again in the womb. Natural birth refers to a world of sin and that all men are sinners (Rom. 3.23). The compound ἀναγεννάω (*anagennaō*) has the meaning of “cause to be born again” (Ringwald 1975: 176). There is an Old Testament connection as “I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You’” (Ps. 2.7). The new origin is in God through Jesus Christ, which is different from the physical birth in 1.13. Being born in the Spirit is an exchange. It is similar to other phrases such as “born from above” (3.7) and “born of God” (John 3.9). This notion cannot be fully comprehended by the human mind and hence it is therefore difficult for Nicodemus to understand.

*Born again* is a concept in the translation in John 3.3. Semiotically, the term works on three levels: first, ‘from above’, i.e. from heaven, implying that earthly things are perishable; second, ‘from the beginning’, implying that the past needs to be wiped out and a new life is created; and third, ‘born again’ indicating a distinction between physical birth and spiritual birth. By merely translating as *born again* in ESV and NIV (with the footnote as *born from above*), these three interpretations are not possible. The Message translation, *born from above*, is confusing as *above* is a highly vague term and may cause confusion and mythical allusions. The author presents the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus for better comprehension. The ESV, NIV and The Message translations need to communicate the entire contextual information and consider processing costs, and ideally should carry a footnote explaining the meaning to the original audience

## 2.2. Ἀμήν Amen (1.51)

καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Ἀμήν ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεφύοτα καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναβαίνοντας καὶ καταβαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

- ESV: And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”
- NIV: He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”
- The Message: You haven’t seen anything yet! Before this is over you’re going to see heaven open and God’s angels descending to the Son of Man and ascending again.”

*Ἀμήν* (*amēn*) is used twenty-five times in John (Kanagaraj & Kemp 2002: 92). It comes from the Hebrew word *Amen* which means ‘to confirm’, ‘make sure to support’. Jesus uses it for solemn assurance. It is the climax of the introductory passage to the entire gospel. *Ἀμήν* is usually translated as *Amen* and sometimes as *verily*, *of a truth*, *most assuredly*, and *so let it be*. It also serves as an “emphasis marker” and introduces a statement of pivotal importance. They are essential in interpreting the entire passage. This repetition of the word *ἀμήν ἀμήν* (*Amēn amēn*) has the force of a “superlative, most assuredly” (Strong 1996: 657).

In the present study, Nathaniel, who was earlier sceptical, suddenly recognises the Messiah and praises Him. The use of *Amēn amēn* points to this particular context and invites the direct attention of the readers. The text also implies that the Hebrew word *Amen* was common in the Old Testament (Num. 5.22 and Neh. 8.6). Hence, it implies the heralding of an important statement will be understood by the disciple later when they reread their life events with Christ, such as the gospel writers. It is used in John to add solemnity and this technique of emphasizing his words marks the uniqueness of Jesus (Tasker 1960: 70).

*Truly* has the etymology in *treowlice* (Klein 1971: 347) and has been defined as “in agreement with fact” (OED 2005: 1644). The usage implies solemn assurance. The NIV, ESV and The Message translations need to communicate the entire context. The translation as *very truly* in NIV calls for an emphasis on the truth of the promise that Jesus offers to Nathaniel. The ESV translation, *truly* (1.51), implies an assurance repeated for emphasis and certainty. The Message translation, *You haven’t seen anything yet!*, addresses the context of Nathaniel’s surprise and invites to a future revelation of greater expectation. Though the tone of a promise is lacking, the emphasis is more on surprise and anticipation in The Message. More than the truth or certainty or promise factor, it is the pattern of giving solemn assurance for greater truth. This pattern needs to be explained for the present-day audience for original interpretation as it was shared contextual information. It may be translated along with footnotes carrying the cognitive environment implicature of the original text.

2.3. *υἰὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Huion tou anthropou (1.51)*

καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεφρότα καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναβαίνοντας καὶ καταβαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὸν υἰὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

- ESV: And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”
- NIV: He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”
- The Message: You haven’t seen anything yet! Before this is over you’re going to see heaven open and God’s angels descending to the Son of Man and ascending again.”

The phrase *Son of Man* is an expression used thirteen times in the gospel. Jesus used this phrase to refer to himself. The *υἰὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (huion tou anthropou)* is an “unveiling of divine attributes in the divine form” (Howard 1952: 490). The “Son of Man” was predicted by Jesus to be betrayed; delivered up; lifted up; suffer and die and hence gave his life as a ransom for many. The primary audience of John was enlightened in this regard and hence its inclusion in John.

According to Jewish law, a lamb was sacrificed for the sins of a man. In such a context, Jesus became a sacrifice for humankind. He was an undefiled lamb for the entire human race. This claim, as Son of Man, shows the identity of Jesus as a humble and obedient servant. All four gospels use this title, and scholars consider it to have derived from Daniel’s prophetic books where *Son of Man* refers to one who represented God and his people. Ezekiel, the prophet was also addressed by God as *Son of Man*. Similarly, it also alludes Jacob’s dream (Genesis 28:12), refers to the imagery of angels ascending and descending. In such a context, Jesus takes the position of God’s prophet to a people in captivity (Kanagaraj & Kemp 2002: 93).

John speaks of Jesus being lifted up from the earth in his narrative, implying crucifixion and glory. The act of the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness (Num. 21:9) was a part of the cognitive environment of the primary audience and hence required low processing costs. A similar expectation is given in the concept of *the Son of Man*. His uplifting in his death would be the means of drawing all unto himself (12.32). The Son of Man is to ascend to heaven and descend from heaven. It has Jewish roots (Ladd 1974: 281) and *Man* implies the human race; of which Jesus belongs in the narrative.

The *Son of Man* is a socio-cultural word, and modern translations need footnotes to explain implicit meanings. Its translation requires processing effort and needs to be relevant. The extended meaning of the concept needs to be explicated for the secondary audience. Hence, the translations – ESV, NIV and The Message – cannot be communicative by merely translating the words and not the implicit information. The appropriate information needs to be available for a secondary audience in a footnote or the background material of the translation.

#### 2.4. σημείων *semeion* (2.11)

Ταύτην ἐποίησεν ἀρχὴν τῶν σημείων ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐν Κανὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ ἐφάνερωσεν τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ

ESV: This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

NIV: What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

The Message: This act in Cana of Galilee was the first sign Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

The Greek word *σημείων* (*semeion*) can be translated in English with the word *sign* and is defined as “a mighty work wrought by Jesus that represents the revelatory and redemptive event happening in him” (Guthrie 1990: 273). Signs were miracles which had the primary purpose of demonstrating something more than the sign itself. Their value was more on confirming the power of the one who would do the sign as evidence that he was something out of the ordinary. In John, a sign was to mean that Jesus was extraordinary with the emphasis on the person Jesus and not the sign itself (Ladd 1974: 38). Hence signs were designed to lead to faith in Jesus. They must also be seen as a revelation of the identity of Jesus and his oneness with the Father.

Signs were used in the Old Testament in prophet Jonah and connected with the Exodus event of Israelites in the book of Genesis. Signs functioned as pointers seeking to reveal something outside of the event. The sign had the function of pointing to the authority of what was proclaimed. In the Old Testament, a miracle assures people of God’s presence and power, such as in Exodus 4.1–9. Thus, signs in John function two ways: first, the meeting of physical needs of man and second, to meet the spiritual needs. Signs cause the masses or the individual receiving it to produce faith and stand as a witness. John, the Baptist bears witness to Jesus (John 1:15–27). After seeing the water turn into wine, the disciples witness Jesus’ power (John 2:1–11). The Samaritan woman bears witness to Jesus (John 4:1–42). The Father bears witness to Jesus. Hence, the signs are intimately linked with belief and the role of witness (Ladd 1974: 343). This forms the cognitive environment of the primary audience.

*Signs* in 2.11 etymologically originates from *signe* and means ‘a sign’ or ‘a mark’ (Browne 2018: 225). A sign is defined as “a motion or gesture by which a thought is expressed” (OED 2005: 1419). Signs are consciously introduced in the text to produce faith. Hence, they are present to confirm a larger pattern of implied meanings. They are not merely symbols or signals. The primary audience was well aware of its interpretation in the miracles done by prophets to convey that they are from God. Miracles focused on the aspect of power, while signs focused on the aspect of producing belief. This contextual information will require a certain level of processing efforts from the secondary audience. It may be provided as extra-textual material explaining signs as revelatory actions, and not mere symbols.

2.5. ἠγάπησεν *egapesen* (3.16)

Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

ESV: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

NIV: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The Message: “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.

John uses *ἀγάπη* (*agape*) to mean ‘to love’ thirty-six times, while *agape love* occurs seven times (Ladd 1974: 34). This unfathomable depth of the love is stressed by this *agape* which is unconditional love and forms the cognitive environment for the selected text. The love that the Father has for the Son is considered “the archetype of all love”. This fact is made visible in the sending and self-sacrifice of the Son in John 3.16 (Gunther & Link 1976: 543). It has a firm base in the Old Testament but is more a dominant theme in the New Testament. God goes beyond the limit to give up his one and only Son. Here, we have the cognitive environment of Abraham giving up Isaac in the Pentateuch (Gen. 22). This framework of his forefather reflects in the sacrifice his one and only son in obedience to the will of God (Gen. 22). It is this great love that God had for the world. The human understanding of tenderness, forgiveness, and love in the relationship of a father to an only child provides an appropriate picture of the sacrifice and its depth. The depth of love was measured in the Old Testament by means of gifts. God’s gift to humankind was his precious son Jesus. It has thus been said that the most significant feature in God loving the world is that “he loved so comprehensively” (Guthrie 1990: 104).

*Love* comes etymologically from *lufu* and has a wide range of meanings which includes ‘the feeling of love’, ‘romantic attraction’, ‘affection’, ‘friendliness’ and ‘the love of God’ (Klein 1971: 466). ) In John 3:16, the translation in The Message makes the extent of God’s love explicit (“this is how much”), whereas the NIV and ESV preserve the more conventional wording “For God so loved.”. The Message translation makes explicit, through its construction, the implied destruction that awaits those who do not believe. Jesus as the *only Son* (ESV) and *one and only Son* (NIV) is made explicit to understand the proportion of God’s love and sacrifice. The Message also makes it explicit by focusing on the “Son” aspect and also on the “one and only” factor by repetition. The characteristic of *agape love* is that it is of divine nature (Howard 1952: 702). It is unconditional in reaching out of the sinful world, and this is to be emphasised for communication. It can be translated as *unconditional love*. This love of God goes beyond the limit to give up his one and only Son. Abraham’s parallel of giving up Isaac needs to be supplied in the translation as supplementary information for complete understanding. This will lead to cognitive benefit for the processing cost involved.

## 2.6. μονογενῆ *monogene* (3:16)

Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

ESV: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

NIV: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The Message: “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.

*Monogene* is a compound word of *mono* (‘only’) and *gene* (‘begotten’). The literal translation is *only begotten* and fits the context. There are different meanings from ‘unique,’ to ‘single of its kind’ and ‘only child of parents’ (Strong 1996: 36). In the context of the verse, it refers to Christ as the only Son of God. The word *monos* is frequently used for God’s uniqueness, and the context here serves to explain that God’s stage of sacrifice to His only begotten Son reveals the depth of his sacrifice. In a broader frame, the meaning is that the Son is the only offspring of the parent, not the only existing person of his kind. It is not to be misunderstood as “one of a kind,” because the parent is also of the same kind (Bartels 2003: 723). The differentiation is implied that Jesus is “begotten, not made” (Noll 2012: 58). In John, the Son is not “one of a kind” but shares the very nature of the Father and hence is the “only begotten Son” of the Father. This ‘only begotten son’ becomes the firstborn after fulfilling the promise (John 1:12).

The ESV, NIV and The Message translations need to communicate the entire contextual information. The word *μονογενῆ* (*monogenes*) in John 3.16 has been translated as *one and only Son* in NIV and The Message and as *only Son* in ESV. The meaning of the nature of Christ in relation to God as begotten is reduced to the human understanding of ‘only child’. The translation is rendered to be easily understood, but the original context is not supplied. The translation must retain ‘only begotten Son’ and supplement the context of the original cognitive environment. In John, the Son is not “one of a kind” but share the very nature of the Father and hence is the “only begotten Son” of the Father (Howard 1952: 69). The cognitive environment needs to be supplemented in footnotes.

## 3. Conclusion

Translation takes place from one context to another context, which is the source context of the text to the receiver’s context. This gap in context needs to be bridged without distorting the original meaning of the text. In relevance theory, the original interpretation can be formed only in the original context. Hence, if John interacts with the contemporary audience of a different worldview/culture, a different interpretation from that of the original is formed. Such translations that focus on introducing changes and adapting them to the audience’s

culture/worldview can lead to a different interpretation. All translations, as well as other texts, have the problem of deriving the intention of the author. In the communicative framework of relevance theory, the basic assumption is that translation is for communication between the author and the reader. Therefore, the context, as in human communication, supplies the rest of the information for the interpretation of the text. There are studies which refer to communication models as inadequate (Bonard 2024: 145) and suggest modifying the inferential model to include non-intentional behaviours as a solution (Wharton et al. 2021: 259). By drawing on addition, supplementation, cognitive environment, and processing cost, the study achieves higher interpretive relevance in explaining translation decisions in the Gospel of John.

Every translated text needs to be assessed in the cognitive environment of the primary and secondary audience. The interpretation process is both communicative and needs the cognition of the reader. By comparing the Greek concepts in translation, the need for a paradigm in assessment is identified. In translation, the original interpretation, ostensive-inferential communication, communicative clues, contextual effects, processing cost, and the cognitive environment are the communicative paradigms of relevance theory. ESV, NIV and The Message are three translations focusing on the contemporary audience but limit the cognitive environment of the text and the reader. The concept of communication is analysed in the contemporary translations of John 1–3. The study has dealt with identifying and investigating translations in order to build a communicative paradigm for assessment. The analysis is based on the two principles of relevance. The first principle, cognitive principle, deals with the cognitive process of the reader (Sperber & Wilson: 1986: 7). The analysis considered the stimuli, context and interpretation in this regard. Such an analysis helps analyse the presence/absence of provisions needed for the cognitive process based on relevance. The second principle, communicative principle, deals with the communication with the contemporary reader (Sperber & Wilson: 1986: 9).

The struggle in communicating a text is well represented in the history of Bible translation. The application of relevance theory in translation as secondary communication has led to a “paradigm shift” (Doty 2007: 20) in the theoretical studies produced thus far in translation studies. The importance of contextual information to arrive at the original interpretation struggles to come up with the original meaning. It is possible by using pictures in sketches, diagrams and footnotes. The cognition of the reader and the communication of the source text are equally dealt with in relevance theory. As discussed, its application can be used on a larger scale for different types of text, audiences and translation genres. It is instrumental in translating literature – local into global, ancient into contemporary, from genre to multiple genres.

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