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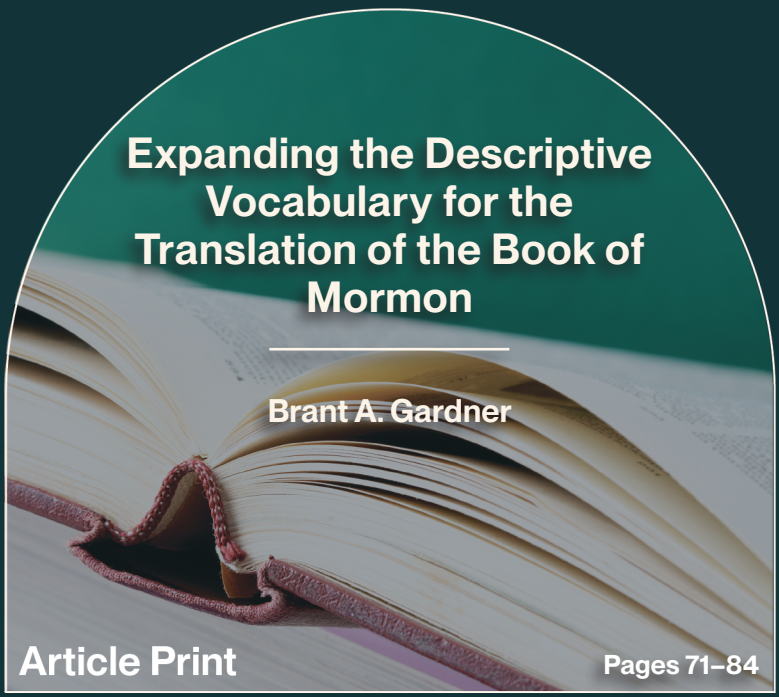

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Expanding the Descriptive Vocabulary for the Translation of the Book of Mormon

Brant A. Gardner

Abstract: *There are many questions that can be asked about the translation of the Book of Mormon. This paper focuses on a single question: What was the relationship between the English translation and the Nephite text? Of course, without the original, we must speculate, but it is suggested that there are two concepts used in modern translation theories that can help us understand why certain elements appear in the English translation that might appear to have a questionable relationship to an ancient Nephite text.*

Questions about the translation of the Book of Mormon are as old as the first day Joseph Smith acquired the plates and the interpreters. Joseph Knight Sr. reminisced:

> He went on to tell the Length and width and thickness of the plates and said he they appear to be Gold But he seamed to think more of the glasses or the urim and thummem then he Did of the Plates for says he I can see anything they are Marvelus. Now they are written in Caracters and I want them translated.[1]

Knight's memory reveals several important facts related to the translation of the Book of Mormon:

- There were non-English characters on the plates.
- The interpreters were immediately recognizable as a type of seerstone, an instrument with which Joseph was already

1. Joseph Knight Sr., "Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," *Early Mormon Documents,* ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 4:15.

familiar. Therefore, he knew immediately how to use the interpreters and he initially used them to "see."

- Although he could immediately see "anything" with the interpreters, he did not immediately see the translation of the writings on the plates. Evidently, Joseph did not initially understand that he would be the translator.

After Joseph and Emma relocated to Harmony, Joseph copied some of the characters and gave them to Martin Harris to "see if he Could git them Translated."[2] It was understood that whatever language the characters on the plates represented, they were of a text that could be translated into English. That much is clear and obvious. To this day, less clear and certainly not obvious is how the translation was accomplished and what the relationship between the printed English text and the plate language was.

The Impenetrability of the Translation Method

Besides Joseph Smith, the only other person with experience in attempting to translate the Book of Mormon was Oliver Cowdery. The Lord declared to Oliver: "And, behold, I grant unto you a gift, if you desire of me, to translate, even as my servant Joseph" (Doctrine and Covenants 6:25). Oliver did make an attempt, but was unable to successfully translate (see Doctrine and Covenants 9:5–12).[3] That leaves us with Joseph as the only successful translator, and he simply indicated that it was done by the gift and power of God. As far as we know, Joseph never reflectively analyzed to others how he was able to translate. Sufficient for him was that he did translate, and that he could not have done it through his own intellect. It was, in Knight's spelling, "marvelus." Knight very clearly used that word with the 1828 meaning:

2. Knight, "Reminiscence," 4:17. See also the retelling of this information in Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 34–35.
3. See also Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 310–15 for a discussion of why Oliver was unable to translate. An alternate proposal is Stan Spencer, "The Faith to See: Burning in the Bosom and Translating the Book of Mormon in Doctrine and Covenants 9," *Interpreter: a Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 219–32, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-faith-to-see-burning-in-the-bosom-and-translating-the-book-of-mormon-in-doctrine-and-covenants-9/.

"The *marvelous* in writings, is that which exceeds natural power, or is preternatural" (from Webster's 1828 dictionary).[4]

It is possible that Joseph, despite being closely involved in the translation process, did not fully understand the method any better than those who have since attempted to explain it. Without expert testimony from the only person who had firsthand experience with the translation method, we are left struggling to discover a plausible method based on peripheral information. We have witnesses who described what they observed and heard, but none of them had the experience of using the interpreters or the seerstone to translate. Their descriptions have been used in arguments of how the translation related to the Nephite text, but the fact remains that all discussions of the process of translation are based on speculation, which in turn is based upon the thin available evidence.[5]

What Kind of Translation is the Book of Mormon?

The first premise we must establish is that the English translation is not a perfect or immutable representation of the underlying text. David Bellos, a professor at Princeton University, noted:

> Give a hundred competent translators a page to translate, and the chances of any two versions being identical are close to zero. This fact about interlingual communication has persuaded many people that translation is not an interesting topic — because it is always approximate, it is just a second-rate kind of thing. That's why "translation" isn't the name of a long-established academic discipline, even though its practitioners have often been academics in some

4. Noah Webster, ed., *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. "marvelous," webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Marvelous.
5. The discussion of the presence of Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon describes the grammar of the text. It has been used to suggest that someone other than Joseph Smith accomplished the translation. The issue of who translated the Book of Mormon is not relevant to this paper. Regardless of who translated, the issue of how the English text represented the Nephite text remains the same. A good overview of the arguments for Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon is found in the chapter "The Original Text: Its Language and Issues," in Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon,* Part Three, *The Nature of the Original Language* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU], 2018), 37–89.

> other field. How can you have theories and principles about a process that comes up with no determinate results?[6]

Even without Bellos's expertise, Brigham Young implicitly understood this problem, stating: "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."[7] Just as one hundred modern competent translators with all the modern tools and dictionaries would produce different translations, an individual and perhaps idiosyncratic translator would produce different translations of the Book of Mormon.

If we take the Book of Mormon seriously as a translated text, we must therefore expect that the current English text may have introduced some elements that might not precisely represent the original Nephite text. This is a problem that can be easily demonstrated when a translation can be compared to the original.

> There has been considerable debate concerning the concept of gods and divinity in ancient Mesoamerica. The 16th c. Spanish chronicles make frequent and direct references to *dioses,* or "gods." However, it has been justly noted that European terminology may have grossly simplified complex concepts of sacredness and divinity. Among the 16th c. Zapotecs, the term *pee,* signifying "breath, spirit, or wind," expressed the concept of divinity. This animist force caused movement — all phenomena or maternal [sic, material?] things that expressed motion were attributed a certain degree of sacredness. Among the Aztecs, the term for sacredness was *teotl* which, like the Zapotec *pee,* referred to an immaterial energy or force similar to the Polynesian concept of *mana.*[8]

In terms of translation, representing *teotl* as *dios* does have a connection to the original concept. However, once it becomes "dios," some concepts from the original are lost due to the more familiar

6. David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?: Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 8–9.
7. Brigham Young, "The Kingdom of God," *Journal of Discourses* 9 (13 July 1862): 311.
8. Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 89.

semantic range of "god." With the benefit of knowledge of the original, scholars can understand the subtleties of the original. In the case of the Book of Mormon, we do not have the original, thus readers of the Book of Mormon simply assume the semantic range of the English word or phrase, without the understanding that there might not be an exact overlap with the semantic range of the word in the Nephite text.

One potential place where this disjunction in the semantic overlap can be discerned in the Book of Mormon is in the use of, and emphasis on, the *name* Jesus Christ: "For according to the words of the prophets, the Messiah cometh in six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem; and according to the words of the prophets, and also the word of the angel of God, his name shall be Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (2 Nephi 25:19). The problem here is not a question of anachronism, but of translation. *Jesus* is the name; *Christ* is the title. The name could be the result of a revelation to Nephi, but the title *Christ* would be more accurately translated as *Messiah*. Both *Christ* and *Messiah* translate the same concept, but one transliterates from Greek and the other from Hebrew. Given the declared nature of the Book of Mormon, *Messiah* would be the better translation. Indeed, *Messiah* appears at the beginning of the very same verse that uses *Jesus Christ* as a name. In terms of translation, it can be considered "correct" that there is a connection between *Jesus Christ* and *Messiah*. However, once the New Testament term is applied, the connotations shift from the Hebrew religion to the Christian religion. This additional connotation makes the Book of Mormon appear more Christian than the original might have indicated.

The second possibility is that when the Nephite text spoke of the name, it may have had a different connotation than the one we expect. For many ancient cultures, there was a very real connection between the name and the person. It was not simply a label, but an intimate part of the person.[9] In Isaiah, we have an example of this ancient use of the concept of the name: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). The name *Immanuel* is given for its linguistic meaning of "God with us." The Hebrew name had a meaning that was more important *as a meaning* than as a designation. The message is that God would be with them, not that a person would have a label his friends would call him. It is likely that given Nephi's

9. Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1972), 284–305.

declared origin, he would have used names much more as Isaiah did, than as we do. Thus, the meaning of *Jesus* (Yahweh saves) was more important for the message than it was as a prophetic declaration of a personal name.

Understanding the Relationship of the Translation to the Original

The best way to understand the relationship between an original text and its translation is to have both the original and the translation available for study. We do not have that luxury for the Book of Mormon; we have only the translation. Thus, anything we posit about the relationship between the Nephite text and the English translation is based on secondary evidence. One of the ways to put controls on speculation is to ground our investigation on what has been learned about translations where both the original and translation can be examined.

Not only was "Nephite" a different language, but it also came from a very different culture. Translating between two similar languages is complicated enough, but when translating between languages *and* cultures, the translation issues are compounded. Just as it is easier to translate between languages in the same linguistic family (such as from French to Spanish), it is also easier to translate between languages rooted in shared or overlapping cultures. Greater skill, and perhaps even a measure of artistry, are required to translate well when the two languages are quite different *and* they represent very different cultures and mentalities.[10]

The problem of translating flora and fauna

One of the best-known criticisms of the Book of Mormon comes from the recognition that the English translation of the Book of Mormon contains names for plants and animals that do not represent lora and fauna that were unique to the Nephite era. Additionally, known New World flora and fauna that were culturally important do not appear in the Book of Mormon.

Criticisms based on vocabulary possibly make one of two implicit assumptions about the Book of Mormon. The first would be that the book is not a translation at all and therefore these vocabulary items are the original English words in which the book was written. The second

10. Said M. Shiyab, *A Textbook of Translation: Theoretical and Practical Implications* (Chicago: Garant Publishers, 2006), 19.

assumption allows it to be a translation, but assumes that there is a direct connection between the source word and its English translation. The first assumption must be combatted with evidence of historicity, not the nature of translation. The second assumption clearly rests upon a particular understanding of translation. Given what we know about how translation works when the source text and the target text are very different both linguistically and culturally, this assumption of a close word-for-word, meaning-for-meaning translation is too simplistic. The very fact that there can be multiple translations of the same text declares that translation need not be a word-for-word, exact meaning-to-exact meaning representation of the original text.

Bellos discussed the nature of translation between two languages representing very different cultures. He suggested that there is a translation "up" or a translation "down," based upon which language is presumed to be the more dominant. He explained:

> What distinguishes translating up from translating down is this: translations toward the more general and more prestigious tongue are characteristically highly adaptive, erasing most of the traces of the text's foreign origin; whereas translations down tend to leave a visible residue of the source, because in those circumstances foreignness itself carries prestige.[11]

And he provided an explanatory example:

> Imagine: Sir Walter Raleigh presents Queen Elizabeth I with an amazing root vegetable he's brought back from the New World and beseeches Her Majesty to reward him for the discovery of . . . the turnip. It wouldn't have worked because it was not a turnip. When you have a potato in your hand, you can't call it by the name of anything that you could be holding in your other hand. "Cultural substitution" is a naming and translation device that is suited exclusively to things that aren't there. You can't just expand the meaning of *turnip* by using it to name things that aren't turnips. Similarly, when Ruyl [a seventeenth-century translator] wrote *pisang* [banana] for "fig," he did not expand the meaning of the Malay term. No new class of tree suddenly arose that included both bananas and figs. What this kind of cultural substitution

11. Bellos, *Fish in Your Ear,* 169.

> really says is that you can't really understand, and we're not going to try to explain. Have a banana instead.[12]

Without access to the original Nephite text, English becomes the default "more prestigious" language. Thus, according to normal translation processes used by modern translators, we would expect the vocabulary items to be aligned to English, rather than Nephite.

The concept that the Book of Mormon in English is a translation "up" explains why words for flora and fauna are taken from the prevalent English cultural tradition, rather than the less available Native American one. This English dominance creates an issue, even when an apparently apt translation like the word *corn* appears in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 7:22; 9:9, 14). It is obviously tempting to see *corn* as an accurate translation of *maize*. However, Webster's 1828 dictionary primarily defines *corn* as a generic seed, even though it does list *maize* as one of those seeds.[13] Although it is plausible that the translated word *corn* represents *maize*, it cannot be conclusive, because the rest of the translations of flora and fauna do not have such a precise connection to the source language.

Evidence that the Book of Mormon is a cultural translation

Royal Skousen has suggested that the Book of Mormon is "a creative and cultural translation of what was on the plates, not a literal one."[14] Without imagining what Skousen might have meant when he used the word *creative* in his description, the evidence for what a cultural translation means can be more clearly defined.

"The Church's only position is that the events the Book of Mormon describes took place in the ancient Americas."[15] Without a specific location, there are many aspects of possible cultural divergences between source and translation that cannot be addressed. However, there are some cultural divergences that can be addressed. For example, the Book of Mosiah mentions "a dumb ass" twice:

12. Bellos, *Fish in Your Ear,* 175–76.
13. Webster, *American Dictionary*, s.v. "corn," webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Corn.
14. Skousen and Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon,* Part Five, *The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 2019), 6.
15. "Book of Mormon Geography," Topics and Questions, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/book-of-mormon-geography.

> Yea, and I will cause that they shall have burdens lashed upon their backs; and they shall be driven before like **a dumb ass**. (Mosiah 12:5)
>
> Now they durst not slay them, because of the oath which their king had made unto Limhi; but they would smite them on their cheeks, and exercise authority over them; and began to put heavy burdens upon their backs, and drive them as they **would a dumb ass** — (Mosiah 21:3)

In both cases, although there is a reference to an ass, the main focus is not on the animal but on the relationship between two sets of human beings. The use of the animal is a simile for the human beings who are treated as if they were an animal of burden. Perhaps, if the Book of Mormon had originally been translated among cultures which used alpacas and llamas as pack animals, the simile would have referred to an alpaca or a llama. However apt that simile might have been in some New World locations, in other locations, even in the New World, the meaning of the simile might have been missed. But if the intended audience was more familiar with donkeys, the "dumb ass" would be a better translation.

Some examples from French can demonstrate how the meaning can be translated into an acceptable phrase, even though it does not faithfully reproduce the words of the original.[16]

Table 1.

French	Literal Translation	English Idiom/Concept
Quand on parle du loup, on en voit la queue.	When you talk about the wolf, you see its tail.	Speak of the devil.
C'est le serpent qui mord la queue.	It's the snake that bites its own tail.	It's a vicious cycle.
Quelle mouche t'a piqué?	What fly bit you?	What's gotten into you?
Donner sa langue au chat..	To give one's tongue to the cat.	To be out of ideas.

For each example, the English translation provides the correct meaning and does so with a familiar phrasing. However, there is no

16. These examples come from Jamie Edwards, "50 French Idioms That Wow Native Speakers," *Rosetta* Stone, 10 July 2024, blog.rosettastone.com/french-idioms/.

literal tie to the vocabulary of the original. The "correct" translation is connected to meaning, not to vocabulary.

A different category of cultural accommodation in translation lies in the way the King James Version of the Bible appears to be a model for many Book of Mormon passages. For example, the Book of Mormon replicates a number of chapters of Isaiah. There are some interesting deviations, but the translation clearly relies upon the way that text appears in the King James Version.

Additionally, the near-quotations of Paul's discourse on hope and charity found in Moroni 7:44–47 are another potential anachronism. However, if the Book of Mormon is a cross-language, cross-culture translation, the translator has a reason to use Pauline language rather than reproducing the literal text from the plates. The quotation from Paul is an example of translating up. As with the manner in which French idioms above are translated, using Pauline language translates the meaning rather than the vocabulary. The translation appears in form that is normal for the dominant language.

A new concept that may explain nineteenth-century cultural material in the Book of Mormon

There is a relatively new concept in translation, known as *localization.* This provides another way to understand the relationship between the language and culture of the Nephite plates and their English translation. The growing world of software applications has given rise to a desire to more easily use the same code in multiple languages and cultures.[17] However, what the programmers soon discovered was that the translation of words was insufficient. Gita Timofejeva provided an example:

> People might define localization examples as something that would have been traditionally called "adaptation" in the professional translation world.
>
> Let's use this sentence in American English as a simple example:
>
> Two pounds of strawberries cost $10 and will be delivered to you on 04/05/2020.
>
> Here's the translation of this sentence in Spanish without any adaptation:

17. Miguel A. Jimenez-Crespo, *Localization in Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 2.

> Dos libras de fresas cuestan $10 y se le entregarán el 04.05.2020.
>
> But would this translation work for Spanish-speaking Mexico?
>
> The above sentence has to be properly translated for Spanish-speaking Mexico, where:
>
> - People use the metric system for weight, as opposed to the imperial system used in the USA
> - The currency is the Mexican peso, not US dollars
> - The date format used is day-month-year, not month-day-year as it is in the USA[18]

Localization suggests that there must also be a translation of the original language and culture into a form more available in the target language and culture. Aspects of the English translation of the Book of Mormon may be explained by understanding that it is a translation *up* as well as a *localized* translation.

There is no way Joseph Smith could have understood that he was creating a localized translation, but localization is a reasonable explanation for the several nineteenth-century environmental elements found in the English translation. Texts replicating the familiar King James Version of the Bible localized the vocabulary and meaning to match the expected context of accepted scriptural language and texts.

When the Book of Mormon's English is examined for how it might represent the original Nephite text, there are three general categories of representation:

- **Literalist**: An attempt to preserve the original (Nephite plates) as much as possible. Bellos might classify this as a translation "down," where the original is the most important text and as much of that text is preserved as possible.
- **Functional**: The idea that a single text may be translated in different ways highlights the nature of functional translations. In this case, the dominant language (English) is the one into which the original is translated, or a translation "up." In

18. Gita Timofejeva, "Translation and Localization: What's the Difference," *Localise*, 4 September 2024 lokalise.com/blog/translation-and-localization-difference/#:~:text=Localization%20goes%20beyond%20translation%20to,%2C%20social%2C%20and%20linguistic%20nuances.&text=With%20translation%2C%20you're%20adapting%20a%20message.

a functional translation, there is a connection to the original text, but the way it is represented depends upon the art and perhaps the goal of the translator.

- **Conceptual**: This would be a translation that communicates something about the original, but which does not have direct connections to the vocabulary or structure of the original. This might be the kind of translation Blake Ostler argued for when he suggested that Joseph Smith "provided unrestricted and authoritative commentary, interpretation, explanation, and clarifications based on insights from the ancient Book of Mormon text and the King James Bible."[19]

Summary and Conclusions

The addition of the idea of a localized translation is a layer of explanation added on to the functional relationship. A localized translation is a functional translation, but it adds the specific intent to cross the cultural bridge to make the final translation better understood by the target audience.

The Book of Mormon was printed in 1830 and presented to a ninteenth-century audience. The omnipresence of a King James Version-like style in the translation localized the new book as scripture for the reception audience. In the case of Pauline language, the underlying meaning was probably similar to that communicated by Paul, but the actual language derives from the King James Version of Paul. Translating idioms demonstrates that meaning can be represented without replicating specific vocabulary. Localization explains why the KJV Pauline language appears in the translation.[20]

Positing the Book of Mormon as a translation requires that we define the nature of the translation, if we are to understand it. Rather than criticize the text for what we might perceive as translation errors,

19. Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 66.
20. Nicholas J. Frederick notes that the most plausible explanation for New Testament language in the Book of Mormon is to sound more like the KJV, an accepted scriptural style. That concept is essentially the same as the proposed idea of localization, which simply describes the reason for that language in terms of the reception audience. It should be noted that Frederick deals with the ways the texts are used. That is important information, but separate from this paper's concerns, which are solely in expanding our vocabulary of translation. Nicholas J. Frederick, "Finding Meaning(s) in How the Book of Mormon Uses the New Testament," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 30 (2021): 2.

we should understand that a good translation becomes "enriched by the new meanings that are engendered as it enters new contexts — that is, as it remains alive and is read anew."[21]

Although the original Nephite text may have had connotations that did not make it into our English translation, it is nevertheless true that the Book of Mormon can be inspiring scripture *even in translation.* Those who read the Book of Mormon — in any language — are potentially able to receive the full spiritual benefit of the text. The English text accomplishes its religious goals. Perhaps it is comforting to all who read the Book of Mormon — in any language — to understand that they are reading a translation, and that the translation is sufficient for the religious function of the text.

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21. Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky, "Introduction: A Culture of Translation," in *In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means*, ed. Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), xviii.

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