

The Study of Language & Translation

The study of language involves the study of grammar and its elements. It is impossible to convey meaning if the recipient does not recognize the difference between feud and viewed; or between was and is, or between “I gave it to him” or “He gave it to me.” If words are meaningless then it is impossible to communicate.

Language study involves phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary.

1. **Phonology** – the study of the elements of sound used to form words or phrases. An example of a phrase: “*Get eem!*” Eem is only meaningful in the word group, but not alone.

Since the sounds of language can only be studied in the spoken form, it is necessary to use some other way of studying the phonology of historical languages. The written recordings of language has provided us with such materials; therefore, orthography – the study of the method of writing – is auxiliary to the study of phonology.

2. **Morphology** – the study of the forms of words or the formation of inflected words. This is particularly important in an inflected language.

Languages can be described as isolating, agglutinating, or inflecting, depending on their way of indicating the relationship between words.

- a. When the relationship is purely word order without any other indication, the language is isolating.

Eg: “*Joe hit John.*” Compared to “*John hit Joe.*”

English is not basically an isolating language, though it relies a lot on word order to convey meaning.

- b. Agglutinating languages tack together a number of elements to a basic word. For example, to refer to a certain kind of altruism as “*do-good-ism*” and then to speak of a man’s “*do-good-ism-ness*,” we are approaching an agglutinating method.
- c. Inflection is the modification of a word root or stem – which is never in itself a word except by accident – by adding prefixes, infixes, suffixes, or other formative elements.

English traces of inflection remain in words such as: *love, loves, loved, loving, unloved, and unloving* and in *he, his, and him*. Greek is a highly inflective language.

- 3. **Syntax** – the study of the means used to convey meaning through words. A vocabulary list contains many words, but it conveys no meaning. The definitions, without syntax, simply supply substitute words. Even the words of a sentence convey no meaning without syntax. For example:

Convey is meaning means of syntax study through the to the used words.

Rearranged according to syntax the words form a meaningful sentence:

Syntax is the study of the means used to convey meaning through words.

4. With the knowledge of phonology, morphology, and syntax, we still cannot communicate unless the words form mental pictures, in other words, unless we know the meaning of the words. Vocabulary control is absolutely essential in language study.

How much vocabulary should you know in any given language? Modern linguistic studies emphasize basic vocabulary.

The Greek New Testament has about 5,500 words. Nearly 3,600 occur 4 times or less. This means you would encounter them once every 160 pages. Over two thirds of the vocabulary of the New Testament is such low frequency. Only about 1,100 words occur 10 times or more.

Other Terms Used in Study of Biblical Languages:

1. Translation – the process of transforming the thought expressed in one language, preferably in equivalent words and equivalent syntax. “Equivalent” does not necessarily mean an exact word-for-word and phrase-for-phrase transfer which would result in very awkward sentences and misunderstood expressions. More important than the words is the idea. The words serve to control the idea, provided they are understood in their own background.

Therefore, translation is an attempt to put the idea defined by the words and syntax of one language into the words and syntax of the second language that will define the same idea.

2. **Exegesis**, sometimes equated with hermeneutics—the study of interpretation, is the **process of discovering the meaning intended by the author**. Since, as we have just discussed, translation involves the same objective, it is necessary for us to have attempted an exegesis of a passage before the final stage of translation. It is customary to study Exegesis only after the elementary study of the language has been completed.

The key to good exegesis is the ability to ask the right questions of the text in order to get at the author's intended meaning: content questions and context questions.

- a. Contextual questions—why it is said.

Contextual questions are of two kinds: historical and literary.

- (1) Historical context has to do with the general historical setting of the document (e.g., the city of Corinth, its geography, people, religions, economy, etc.) and the specific occasion of the document (i.e., why it was written).
- (2) Literary context has to do with why a given thing was said at a given point in the argument or narrative.

- b. Content questions—what is said.

Questions will explore the following four areas:

- (1) Textual criticism—determination of the actual wording of the author,

- (2) Lexical data—the meaning of the words,
- (3) Grammatical data—the relationship of words to one another, and
- (4) Historical-Cultural background—the relationship of words and ideas to the background and culture of the author and his readers.

Good exegesis, therefore, is the happy combination or careful integration of all these data into a readable presentation. The aim of such a presentation is not originality or uniqueness, but a clear understanding of the author's original intention.