

A Theory for Bible Translation: An Optimal Equivalence Model
James D Price

Reviewed by
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In his 1964 landmark book, *Toward a Science of Translating*, Eugene Nida proposed the following: “Is translating, for example, an art or a science? Is it a skill which can only be acquired by practice, or are there certain procedures which can be described and studied? The truth is that practice in translating has far outdistanced theory; and though no one will deny the artistic elements in good translating, linguists and philologists are becoming increasingly aware that the processes of translation are amenable to rigorous description” (p. 3). While Nida in that book, and others, like John Beekman and John Callow in *Translating the Word of God*, set forth the loose framework of that “rigorous description” as it relates to Bible translation, none of those writers actually made a significant effort to hammer out the details of that description. Now less than 50 years later, James Price has set forth what has to be one of the most detailed and rigorous descriptions of not just the Bible translation process from a linguistic standpoint, but also the very fabric of Hebrew syntax, grammar, and discourse.

Price’s work on Optimal Equivalence, as he has called his theory, does not deal with phonological or morphological questions as to the construction of the words of the Hebrew language, a task already approached from various standpoints by others. Rather, his approach focuses on words and the kernel clause, the smallest units of syntactical deep structure, and proceeds from there. His analysis is in keeping with the linguistic theories of the past 50 years and represents a decisive development in Bible translation theory.

Price’s theory in certain ways parallels the well-known syntactic Government and Binding theory (GB) in linguistics, and in particular the X-bar theory portion, recognizing that syntactical units of the text, the “words,” project to phrases which

are themselves parts of clauses, sentences, and discourses. The formulaic descriptions he gives point out a precise and integrated way to understand the construction of the Hebrew text without significant reference to the semantic content of the words. This is a concept essential to understanding the systematic and almost mathematical structure of not just the Hebrew language, but most languages as analyzed under GB theory. To those who find such detailed formulas with which Price's work is filled tedious and complicated, we who are linguistically oriented and used to such formulas say "Get over it!" While such formulas are formidable, the information and insight they give are formidable as well. The ideal nature of such formulas is that they are able to compress verbal expressions into single lines of symbols suitable to be compared with similar formulas at a glance to gain an in-depth look at the deep structure of Hebrew grammar. While Price does also provide verbalization of these formulas regularly for the sake of gaining familiarity with the meanings of the formulas, the serious scholar bent on receiving the full benefit of Price's thorough work must accept willingly the task of digesting the formulas. Not only does Price supply verbalizations at critical points, but he also provides several pages of symbol explanations and a glossary for easy reference. Numerous Hebrew examples with accompanying tree diagrams and analyses also further elucidate the nature of the formulaic expressions.

The work's value is also enhanced by several appendices with rich resources. Those appendices that deal with Hebrew prepositions, negatives, and verbal tense and aspect are very valuable terse and precise descriptions of these aspects of Hebrew grammar. The appendix on Hebrew conjunctions and discourse structure details numerous passages with care to show the "hinge points" of conjunctions. In fact, throughout the entire book one thing is to be impressed on the reader: understanding of Hebrew grammar (and of any other grammar of any other language) does not depend so much on vocabulary and semantic content as it does on the function words, the "hinge words" of the language, the conjunctions, prepositions, articles, and function morphemes, the "small words" of the text.

The work does have some weak points, in that it is fairly easy to get lost in the intricacies of the details and miss the overall sweep of the theory. Optimal Equivalence Theory does not lend itself easily to a simple definition, and Price's glossary entry could equally be applied to Dynamic Equivalence, Functional Equivalence, or Meaning-based theory. His introduction is clearer, but the book ends abruptly without recapping the theory at the end. One would do well to go back and read the Introduction again. Especially in light of certain striking similarities with Optimality Theory in linguistics with its rule ordering and constraints, one would have thought more could have been done to develop that link. The appendix on Hebrew verbal tense and aspect is informative but frustrating, leading as it does to incomplete conclusions. Granted, the author does not claim to have solved the problem, but he seems more chronicling the efforts of others there than speaking to the problem itself.

While it is clear that this work by Price is not easy reading, it is pioneer work in an area where those in Bible translation have often wished to go but have not had the time or resources to do so, and what has been attempted in these areas does not go as far as Price has. As a Bible translator, I find this theory appealing in every way, charting as it does an alternative to the current frustrations in the translation community as to how Relevance Theory (which concerns oral communication, non-verbal communication, and pragmatics) can be applied to an ancient written text. It is also a welcome alternative to translation theories that deal almost exclusively with semantics and ignore the structural equivalence issues. Brace yourself for the long haul, but dig in with interest.