

## LINGUISTIC REFLECTIONS AND MEANING SHIFTS IN *PSALM 23*

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how language mirrors social realities and how lexical shifts in the translations of *Psalms 23* affect meaning elasticity and interpretation. Three sample translations from one biblical source are textualised differently, and are assumed to yield diverse shades of meaning. *Psalms 23* is arguably one of the most popular and well adopted chapters in Christian worship. Its popularity at Christian meetings is accentuated by its accepted space as the exit signature tune of most Christian gatherings. This paper therefore undertakes a linguistic investigation of three translations of *Psalms 23*, namely the *New King James Version*, the *New Living Translation* and the *New International Version* with a view to accounting for various configurations of language and nuances of refractions informed by translation. The conclusion of this paper is that *Psalms 23*, as a piece of religious discourse, embodies diverse imprints of ideologies, power undertones, identity signals and relationship structure. Emphasis is placed on how metaphors and metonyms are used as meaning conduits in the Psalm. The *Psalms 23* discourse is examined from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as propounded by Norman Fairclough (1989).

### **Introduction**

This paper examines how linguistic deployments in biblical texts reflect social realities and how lexical shifts in translations affect meaning elasticity and interpretation. Specifically, three sample translations from one biblical source are textualised differently, and are assumed to yield diverse shades of meaning. The burden of this paper is to describe the shades of differences created by words that have been deployed as interchangeable synonyms in a popular religious discourse, *Psalms 23* and how language use in this Psalm mirrors social realities of power, ideology, identity and relationship. These also provide the conceptual underpinning for this paper drawn from Norman Fairclough (1989) constructs of CDA that are adopted in the explication of the nuances of meaning in the text. Meaning and its correlatives are within the purview covered by Semantics, a sub-set of Linguistics, which is defined in traditional terms as the study of meaning(s). One preoccupation of Semantics is the foray into the study of meaning relations between different linguistic expressions, usually words or lexemes. These relations are varied but include: homonymy, synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, hypernymy and hyponymy. As far as meaning is concerned, the responsibility of linguists remains how to describe these relations and also to characterise with as much precision as possible the meanings of words and other linguistic elements. Meaning or semantic shift in words describes the gradual shift in the conventional meaning of words as people use them in new types of contexts and how these usages become normal.

### Translation Shift in Texts

According to Lotman (1990), 'thinking is translation and translation is dialogue'. Here, translation is perceived as both a mentalistic and an interpersonal activity. First, our understanding of reality or the projection and reproduction of it is first ruminated over in our culture and 'subjectively' interpreted. Second, the dialogic nature of translation presupposes the understanding that it is a centrifugally interactive process with culture and context as constant variables. To this end, Osimo (2015: 209) argues that if we consider culture as different ways to 'metaphorise' perceived reality that it logically follows that thinking consists in translating other people's cultures into ours and vice versa. And by the same token, 'dialogue consists of the constant translation between individuals and group cultures'. Meaning shift reflects those changes that occur during translation. Translation shifts can occur both at the lexico-grammatical or the lower level of language, and at the higher thematic level of texts. Catford (1978:73) stresses that a shift is a departure from a formal correspondence in the process of going from the source language to the target language. He states that in shift of translation or transposition only the form is changed. In addition, he suggests that translation shift be done to get the natural equivalent of the source text message into the target text (1978:76). Translation shifts also occur when there is no formal correspondence to the syntactic item to be translated (Machali, 1998: 3).

Catford (1978) divides the shift in translation into two major types, *level/rank shift* and *category shift*. Level/rank shift refers to a source language item at one linguistic level that has a target language translation equivalent at a different level. In other words, it is simply a shift from grammar to lexis. Category shift refers to departures from formal correspondence in translation. Formal correspondence is any grammatical category in the target language that can occupy the same position in the system of the target language as the given source language category in the source language system (Machali, 1998: 13). Catford divides category shift into the following: *structure shifts*, *class shifts*, *unit shift*, and *intra-system shifts*. *Structure shift* involves the mutation of words sequence in a sentence; *Class shift* occurs when the source item comes from a different word class from the original item. *Unit shift* is the change of rank from a correspondence in the translation equivalent of a unit at one rank in the source language unit at a different rank in the target language. *Intra-system* shift occurs internally within the system, especially where the source and the target language possess systems which align formally to their make up; it involves a selection of incongruous items in the target linguistic context.

The proposal that delineates translation shift into two types is attributable to Machali (1998:152) who brings them under: *obligatory shift* and *optional shift*. In her view, an obligatory shift occurs when no formal correspondence occurs in the translation; it is the shift that its occurrence is dictated by the grammar of the language. Conversely, optional shift refers to movement that is effectuated by a translator's decision. It is called optional shift since the translator could have chosen the more equivalent options with the readers' orientation in the target language text.

Machali (1998: 160) further stresses that there are two basic sources of translation shifts: source language text-centred shift and target language text-centred shift. The source language text-centred shifts are of three kinds: grammatical shifts which include particle markedness, foregrounding, and tenses; shifts related to cohesion which include ellipsis and textual shifts and also include genetic ambivalence and some interpersonal meaning attachment. Machali is of the opinion that the target language text-centred shift informs the problem concerned with achieving communicative effectiveness and pragmatic appropriateness.

For Nida and Taber (2003:171), the most common shifts in meaning found in the transfer process are modifications which involve *specific* and *generic meaning*. These scholars claim that such shifts exhibit a high level of mobility. They add that a shift may result from a difference of the systems. The difference can be in the form of vocabulary or

structure; the shift caused by the vocabulary results in a shift in meaning. The foregoing examples illustrate that there are two kinds of shifts in meaning. The first is meaning shift from a general to a specific meaning. The second is the meaning shift from a specific to a general meaning. These kinds of shifts can often result in incorrect translation. The shift of structure, however, usually does not change the meaning or the message of the original text.

### **Power, Ideology, Identity and Relationship Reflections in Language**

A critical theory like Critical Discourse Analysis (*henceforth CDA*) aims to help the audience understand social problems that are mediated by mainstream ideology and power relationships, all conveyed through the use of written texts in communicative discourses. The goal of CDA is to unmask the ideological assumptions that are embedded in written or spoken texts (Fairclough, 1989, McGregor, 2003). CDA aims to systematically explore often covert relationships between discursive practices, texts, and events and wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes. It explores how opaque relationships are a factor in defining and securing power, the control of it and it draws attention to social imbalances, inequities in the hope of spurring people to corrective actions (Fairclough, 1993).

According to Fairclough (2000), there are three central tenets of CDA, namely social structure (class, status, age, ethnic identity, and gender); culture, (white, black, middle class, women) comprising members from across the social structure (but mainly white, middle class, women) and discourse (the words and language people use which help shape and constrain our identities, relationships, and systems of knowledge and beliefs.) Furthermore, CDA unites and determines the relationship between, three levels of analysis: (a) the actual text; (b) the discursive practices and (c) the larger social context that bears upon the text and the discursive practices (Fairclough, 2000). The text is a documentation of an event where communication is achieved and involves the reproduction of facts and beliefs, the construction of identities of participants in the communication process, and strategic framing of the meaning in the message. Within the purview of discursive practices are set rules, conventions, norms and undocumented models of socially acceptable behaviour that should delineate and regulate roles or relationships used to produce, receive, and interpret messages in a given culture or context (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1977, Gee 1990).

CDA focuses on how social relations, identity, knowledge, and power are constructed through written and spoken texts. Discourse always involves power and ideologies and is connected to the past and the current context (is historical), and can be interpreted differently by people because they have different backgrounds, knowledge, and power positions—therefore, the “right” interpretation does not exist whereas a more or less plausible or adequate interpretation is likely (Fairclough, 2002; Wodak & Ludwig, 1999). van Dijk (2000) acknowledges that CDA does not have a unitary theoretical framework or methodology because it is best viewed as a shared perspective encompassing a range of approaches instead of one school. One key principle of CDA is that the way we write, and what we say, is not arbitrary- it is purposeful whether or not the choices are conscious or unconscious (Sheyholislami, 2001). This paper analyses the written language of a religious text from the perspective that meaning in translation is predicated on the translators’ deliberate choices of lexical items.

### **The Discourse of *Psalm 23***

The Psalms generally have a capacity to capture the reality of human experiences as they express the common experiences of the human race. They are assumed to have been composed by numerous authors who focused on various themes that express the emotions, personal feelings, attitudes, gratitude, and interests of the average individual. (Richards Lawrence, *The Teacher’s Commentary*) *Psalm 23* is unarguably the Psalm of David and one

of the most popular and easily adopted in public/Christian gatherings. Richards Lawrence explains in his *The Teacher's Commentary* that the Psalms were written over an extended period of time, most probably coming between 1000 and 400 B.C. by different authors, and at several times new groups of psalms were added to the collection. He adds that seventy-three of the psalms were written by David. Forty-nine are anonymous.

Most people agree that the general idea of the word 'discourse' is: "...that language is structured according to different patterns that people's utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life..." (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002:1). This presupposes that there are many discourse types such as religious discourse and several others. Each discourse contains a pattern and is context- modulated, that is, each type depends on when or where it is used in social life. However, Fairclough and Wodak aver that discourse does not only include written and spoken language but also visual images (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997 in Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002: 61). Chilton and Schaffner (2002: 18), mention three ways of defining discourse; focusing the first two on linguistic premises. The first argues that discourses are: "...contextualised, real-time utterances...", meaning that utterances are context-driven. Secondly, it can refer to: "...a stretch of real-time utterances 'perceived as a single language event'...", meaning that several same-time utterances are considered one and that a discourse can accommodate other discourse within the same discourse. The third is that discourse refers to: "...the totality of utterances in a society viewed as an autonomous evolving entity..." (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002: 18). This last approach situates the notion of biblical discourse as the focus of this paper. According to this third approach, discourse should be viewed as a group of statements in society that develops independently of other groups. Furthermore, this way considers discourse to be shared in units of statements and practices, and most importantly, to be inseparable from power. In fact, Chilton and Schäffner argue that CDA is often used for the purpose of revealing: "...the ways in which power, authority and influence are instrumentalised through utterances."

The fact that discourse is both constitutive and constituted and provides an intellectual meeting point signalled by one dimension of discourse is well-attested to. Apparently, the saying that, discourse is both shaping and being shaped by the world that surrounds it, has been upheld by the consensual endorsement of these discourse analysts such as van Dijk ,2008: 86; Phillips and Jorgensen,2002: 61; Fairclough and Wodak,1997: 271.

## **Methodology**

This paper focuses on a single religious text, namely *Psalm 23* which has been analysed from a qualitative perspective. The choice of the three translations of Psalm 23 from the *New King Version*, the *New International Version* and the *New Living Translation* has been informed by their present-day English standard styles of writing. The theoretical paradigm adopted in the analysis of the data is Norman Fairclough's (1989) Critical Discourse Analysis which has been considered an apt tool for the explication of meaning in the text.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

The text is analysed based on the discernible features that account for meaning shifts and reflections of realities that the Faircloughian constructs of power, identity, ideology and relationship help to unveil in the discourse.

## **Meaning Shifts in Biblical Translations**

### **Table 1**

| <b>VERSIONS</b> | <b>TEXTUAL VARIANTS</b>                          | <b>LEXICAL SHIFTS</b>   | <b>MEANING REFRACTIONS</b> |
|-----------------|--|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| NKJV            | The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. | <i>Shall not, want</i>  | Less assertive in posture  |
| NIV             | The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.       | <i>Shall not, want</i>  | Less assertive in posture  |
| NLT             | The Lord is my shepherd, I have all that I need. | <i>Have, all I need</i> | Assertive in posture       |

The translations of the NKJV and the NIV have the same structure and semantic force. However, the NLT is different in structure and meaning entailment. It has some expanded meaning form that creates a clearer picture of the Psalmist's claim. Also, the NLT is more assertive and convincing about the claim made because of the absence of a modal auxiliary and the mark of negation which help to underscore its pragmatic force. Though the words 'want' and 'need' may be taken as synonyms, they have different semantic resolutions and resonances. Drawn from the same word class of the verbs, 'want' tends to suggest an inclusion of secondary and unnecessary appendages to the basic necessities of life which can be foregone (wants) while 'need' tends to point to (needs), the basic necessities of life.

**Table 2**

| <b>VERSIONS</b> | <b>TEXTUAL VARIANTS</b>                                 | <b>LEXICAL SHIFTS</b>            | <b>MEANING REFRACTIONS</b>  |
|-----------------|---|----------------------------------|---|
| NKJV            | He <i>makes</i> me lie down in <i>green pastures</i> ,  | <i>Makes me to lie, pastures</i> | Coercion; a field covered with grass for livestock                          |
|                 | he leads me beside <i>still waters</i> ,                | <i>Still waters</i>              | Not moving, calm, noiseless; a natural body of water                        |
| NIV             | He makes me lie down in <i>green pastures</i> ,         | <i>Makes me lie, pastures</i>    | Coercion; a field covered with grass for livestock                          |
|                 | he leads me beside <i>quiet waters</i> ,                | <i>Quiet water</i>               | little noise, an unknown body of water                                      |
| NLT             | He <i>lets</i> me <i>rest</i> in <i>green meadows</i> ; | <i>Lets me rest, meadows</i>     | Freedom in relaxation; a tract of moist low-lying grassland for livestock   |
|                 | he leads me beside <i>peaceful streams</i> .            | <i>Peaceful streams</i>          | Quiet and calm, without noise; a natural flow of water smaller than a river |

The expressions that cause the shifts in meaning are the nouns, adjectives and the verbs. The expression 'He makes me to lie down' differs from 'He lets me rest...' The former carries with it a tone of coercion which is absent in the NLT which tends to paint a picture of permission or freedom to relax as the word 'rest' suggests. Again, the words 'pasture' and 'meadow' do not have exactly the same meaning. While the former refers to a field covered with grass for livestock, the latter is a type of tract of moist low-lying grassland for grazing livestock and is of better quality than the former. Meaning shifts also occur in the phrases: still waters, quiet waters and peaceful streams. Still water refers to an unknown body of water that is calm and not moving while quiet waters mean a body of water with little noise. A peaceful stream is naturally calm and is smaller than a river. The NLT tends to be more

specific in terms of the usage of concrete nouns to bring vividness to the description of nouns in the psalm.

**Table 3**

| <b>VERSIONS</b> | <b>TEXTUAL VARIANTS</b>                                      | <b>LEXICAL SHIFTS</b>            | <b>MEANING REFRACTIONS</b>                |
|-----------------|--|----------------------------------|---|
| NKJV            | He restores my soul.   | <i>Restores my soul</i>          | Give back, return                         |
|                 | He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  | <i>In paths of righteousness</i> | Following religious or moral laws         |
| NIV             | He restores my soul.   | <i>Restores my soul</i>          | Give back, return                         |
|                 | He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  | <i>In paths of righteousness</i> | Following religious or moral laws         |
| NLT             | He renews my strength.                                       | <i>Renews my strength</i>        | Make new, fresh or strong again           |
|                 | He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name. | <i>Along right paths</i>         | Morally or socially correct or acceptable |

The words 'restore' and 'renew' have different semantic valency. To restore is to give back a thing after it had been lost while to renew is to make new, fresh or strong. 'In paths of righteousness' and 'along rights paths' do not carry the same meaning. While the former has a religious or moral connotation, the latter extends beyond the religious sphere and cover what is socially correct and acceptable.

**Table 4**

| <b>VERSIONS</b> | <b>TEXTUAL VARIANTS</b>   | <b>LEXICAL SHIFTS</b>  | <b>MEANING REFRACTIONS</b>                        |
|-----------------|---|--|---|
| NKJV            | Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; | <i>Even though; the valley of the shadow of death; fear no evil; with me</i> | No matter whether; valley where death is visible; |
|                 | your rod and your staff, they comfort me.   | <i>Comfort me</i>  | To ease, calm                                     |
| NIV             | Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; | <i>Even though; the valley of the shadow of death; fear no evil; with me</i> | No matter whether; valley where death is visible  |
|                 | your rod and your staff, they comfort   | <i>Comfort me</i>  | To ease, calm                                     |

|            |   |  |   |
|------------|---|--|---|
|            | me.   |  |   |
| <b>NLT</b> | Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. | <i>Even when; the darkest valley; not be afraid; beside me</i> | At any or every time; valley that poses the greatest threat |
|            | Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.   | <i>Protect and comfort me</i>                                  | To secure and to calm                                       |

‘Even though’ in the expression even though I walk ... suggests a probability and ‘the valley of the shadow’ fore-shadows the possibility of death. ‘Even when’ suggests a possibility and the superlative adjective ‘darkest’ paints a picture of how dreadful the valley is. This meaning stretch is also close and protect which are markedly absent and not even suggested in the other translations that provide the data for this paper.

**Table 5**

| <b>VERSIONS</b> | <b>TEXTUAL VARIANTS</b>                                      | <b>LEXICAL SHIFTS</b>                | <b>MEANING REFRACTIONS</b>              |
|-----------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>NKJV</b>     | You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. | <i>a table</i>                       | a meal                                  |
|                 | You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.               | <i>anoint my head; cup overflows</i> | suppressed object of overflow           |
| <b>NIV</b>      | You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. | <i>a table</i>                       | a meal                                  |
|                 | You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.               | <i>cup overflows</i>                 | suppressed object of overflow           |
| <b>NLT</b>      | You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.    | <i>a feast</i>                       | banquet, an elaborate and abundant meal |
|                 | You honour me by anointing my head with oil.                 | <i>anointing my head</i>             | anointing equated with honour           |
|                 | My cup overflows with blessings.                             | <i>overflows with blessing</i>       | identified object of the overflow       |

The phrase ‘a table before me’ and ‘a feast for me’ do not carry the same semantic weight. The feeling of a grandeur reception is imagistically ferried through the word feast which table does not capture. Again, while the expression ‘my cup overflows’ of the NLT identifies an object, both the NKJV and the NIV do not identify any object. This identification and several methods of qualification and quantification help to create semantic contrasts and identifiable shifts in words.

**Table 6**

| <b>VERSIONS</b> | <b>TEXTUAL</b> | <b>LEXICAL</b> | <b>MEANING</b> |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|

|      | VARIANTS  | SHIFTS   | REFRACTIONS                                    |
|------|---|--|--|
| NKJV | Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,                | <i>goodness and love will follow</i>           | To go or come after or behind someone          |
|      | and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.                              | <i>will dwell</i>                              | (formal) to live somewhere                     |
| NIV  | Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,                | <i>goodness and love will follow</i>           | To go or come after or behind someone          |
|      | and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.                              | <i>will dwell</i>                              | (formal) to live somewhere                     |
| NLT  | Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, | <i>goodness and unfailing love will pursue</i> | To follow or try to catch or capture, to chase |
|      | and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.                               | <i>will live</i>                               | To have one's home in a particular place       |

‘To follow’ is to go or to come after or behind someone while ‘to pursue’ is to follow or try to catch to chase after someone. The pictures of being followed or being pursued have different semantic elasticity. While the former tends to suggest a sort of seamless accompaniment the latter mentally activates a scene where a struggle is set in motion. The word ‘dwell’ is more formal than ‘live’ even though they can be assigned synonymous roles.

### Power Relations in *Psalm 23*

In the sentence, *The Lord is my shepherd*, the lexemes ‘Lord’ and ‘shepherd’ reflect power. A lord is superior to a subordinate as a shepherd has absolute control over the sheep. *Psalm 23* presents the shepherd as a power holder. The power of the shepherd is further relayed in verse 2 through the exercise of control over the action of the sheep. The expressions ‘he makes me’ and ‘he leads me’ in ‘He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,’ attest to the power of the shepherd. The shepherd’s power is also evoked through the use of metonyms. The words rod and staff lend credence to the insignia of authority. The power of the shepherd is further underscored by his power to elevate or honour anyone he deems fit as the expressions ‘*prepare a table*’ and ‘*anoint my head with oil*’ tend to suggest. The use of the subjective pronoun and its accompanying referents to refer to the Lord as the shepherd underscores the position of power of the shepherd.

### Ideologies in *Psalm 23*

An ideology is a set of general beliefs commonly shared by a group of people or espoused by a person. Usually, an ideology is not based on innate knowledge but people subscribe to them through written or spoken communication. The following ideologies are contained in the text:

#### Ideology of personal conviction

*I shall not want, I will fear no evil..., they comfort me..., my cup overflows....*

#### Ideology of responsibility

*He guides me..., you are with me..., you prepare a table..., you anoint my head..., I will dwell in the house...*

### **Ideology of control**

*My shepherd..., he makes me... , your rod and your staff...*

### **Ideology of benevolence**

*He restores my soul..., they comfort me..., you prepare a table... , you anoint my head...,*

### **Identities**

*A restorer, a guide, a leader, a protector, a host, an anointer, a companion, a comforter, a restorer*

### **Relationship**

*shepherd-sheep; Lord- servant; comforter- sufferer; guide- follower; host- guest; friend-enemies*

### **Parallelism**

English verse manipulates sound, and emphasizes rhyme and meter. Hebrew poetry repeats and rearranges thoughts rather than sounds. There are several types of parallel arrangement of thoughts, with three being visible in *Psalms 23*.

Synonymous parallelism indicates verses in which the same thought is repeated in different words. E.g *He leads me beside the still waters; He guides me in the paths of righteousness; Your rod and your staff*

Antithetical parallelism indicates verses in which a thought is emphasized by a following contrasting thought. E.g *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*

Synthetic parallelism indicates a pattern of adding thoughts to explain or develop an original expression. E.g. *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

### **Figures of speech**

Language creates vivid pictures through sounds, imagery, similes, metaphors and several others to communicate thoughts and feelings. Some of the figures of speech used in the poem include:

**Metaphor:** *The Lord is my shepherd; The valley of the shadow of death*

**Metonym:** *Rod, staff and oil, a table*

**Imagery:** *Lying down in green pastures; Still waters; overflow*

### **Findings and Conclusion**

This paper has explored three different translations of *Psalms 23* of the Holy Bible, namely the *New King James Version*, the *New International Version* and the *New Living Translation* as different pieces of religious discourse from one source. The findings of this paper reveal that meaning shifts occurred more in the *New Living Translation* and the shifts create new meaning extensions that provide clarification and elucidation on ideas ferried in the other versions. The findings have also revealed that *Psalms 23* is a discourse of power, mirrored from a power holder's point of view who suppresses his own power to elevate a greater power.

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