

Losing puns in translation (Matthew 16:13-20)

Jesus' word association with "Peter" falls flat in almost every language.

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As a professional translator, I find it fascinating to remember that the "original" Greek New Testament is already a translation of Jesus' words. We know that the language Jesus spoke most commonly was neither Hebrew nor Greek but his native Aramaic, the language of his home and his primary listeners.

Only a handful of Jesus' exchanges are recorded in the original Aramaic, though. In Mark 5:41, Jesus raises Jairus's daughter with "Talitha cum." In Mark 7:34, he heals a man who is deaf and mute by saying "Ephphatha." And on the cross he calls out, "El(o)i, El(o)i, lema sabachthani?" according to the gospels of Matthew and Mark. Rendering his cry during crucifixion in Aramaic makes sense to explain the misunderstanding of the witnesses who think he is crying out for Elijah; in the earlier two cases, however, it appears that the main reason for Mark to switch languages is as a literary device to communicate some of the breathless immediacy that is his trademark style.

One other utterance of Jesus, though recorded in Greek, lets its Aramaic roots shine through brightly.

When Jesus declares to Peter that he wants to build his church on this rock in Matthew 16, his clever play with language is all but lost in translation. I know firsthand that any translation task which assumes that something can be linearly and completely transferred from one language to another will fail. That's not how languages and translation work. Instead, my job as a translator is to find an equivalent to the original text's force and meaning in my target text by altering or adding elements.

Jesus' word association with "Peter," however, is an example that falls flat in almost every language. His pun connecting Peter's name with "rock" in the Greek text (Petros vs. petra) can be overtly explained in any language, but where's the fun in that? There are some lucky languages that can skate close to the meaning. Since Latin borrowed "petra" for "rock" from Greek, most of Latin's descendants (such as French, Portuguese, Italian, and Corsican) can rebuild the pun, but it doesn't work seamlessly in any of those languages, not even in Greek.

While the words are similar enough that readers or listeners might get the word play, the gender of these terms is different and requires different endings. In a recent Italian translation, for instance, it was judged too risky to leave the recognition of the similarity to the readers' judgment, so the implicit word play was made explicit.

The language it really works in, naturally, is Aramaic. Here both "Peter" and "rock" are "kēpā (ܩܦܐ)" (which we know as "Cephas") without any differentiation in gender. (Amazingly enough, in the New Testament translations of the Neo-Aramaic languages of Assyrian and Chaldean, both published in the early 2000s, it is still kēpā for both.)

Language detective work like this allows us to listen in on a conversation between Jesus and his disciples in their native language in all its authenticity and humor. And that makes me want to listen even more closely.