

Tight vs Loose Translation of the Book of Mormon

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Descriptions Tight vs Loose Translation

The Book of Mormon is a sacred text of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and it has been translated into many languages around the world. When translating the Book of Mormon, there are two main approaches: tight translation and loose translation.

Tight translation is a method of translation that strives to be as faithful as possible to the original text. This means that the translator will try to preserve the exact wording and structure of the original text, even if it may sound awkward or unnatural in the target language. The goal of tight translation is to maintain the integrity of the original text and to convey its meaning as accurately as possible.

Loose translation, on the other hand, is a method of translation that prioritizes readability and naturalness in the target language. This means that the translator may take some liberties with the wording and structure of the original text in order to make it sound more natural and fluent in the target language. The goal of loose translation is to make the text more accessible and easier to understand for readers in the target language.

Witness Accounts

Firsthand witness accounts state that it was a tight translation. That is, words would appear on the rock in Joseph's hat and would stay there until they were written down correctly. Words that Joseph didn't know how to pronounce he would spell them out. Once written down if there were errors they were corrected and the words would change on the seer stone.

David Whitmer described the translation process as follows:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would

shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery , who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated by Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus, the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.¹

Martin Harris, another of the Three Witnesses, also described the translation process in a similar way:

Martin Harris related an incident that occurred during the time that he wrote that portion of the translation of the Book of Mormon which he was favored to write direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He said that the Prophet possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone, Martin explained the translation as follows: By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin and when finished he would say “Written,” and if correctly written that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used.²

God Commands

When Joseph Smith began translating the Book of Mormon, he was given the commandment not to re-translate the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon that Martin Harris had lost:

Behold, I say unto you, that you shall not translate again those words which have gone forth out of your hands;

For, behold, they shall not accomplish their evil designs in lying against those words. For, behold, if you should bring forth the same words they will say that you have lied and that you have pretended to translate, but that you have contradicted yourself.³

If it wasn't a tight translation, how could Joseph “bring forth the same words?” A loose translation would have Joseph bring forth different words than those he had already translated when he translated the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon.

¹David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, Richmond, Mo.: n.p., 1887, p. 12.

²“One of the Three Witnesses,” *Millennial Star*, Volume 44, p 86-87

³Doctrine and Covenants 10:30-31

To me, this is a strong piece of evidence that the translation of the Book of Mormon was a tight translation, as it would have been impossible for Joseph to “bring forth the same words” if it was a loose translation.

Words In Italics

If this is the case, and it was a tight translation, what are italicized words doing in the Book of Mormon? They appear in the bible verses that were, dare I say copied word for word, from the Bible that Joseph had in his possession. That can be the only explanation I can think of. Joseph was dictating and came across bible passages that were familiar to him, so he made a note to copy them word for word out of the bible instead of what was appearing on the stone.

Was it a time saver? Or was it a way to add fluff to the book to make it appear more full than it would have without those bible passages added to it. According to the Book of Mormon, the bible passages came from the brass plates that were in possession of the Nephites. To me the addition of the italicized words is problematic. If the translation was a tight translation then the italicized words should not be in the Book of Mormon. The actual words would have appeared which might have differed from what the bible that Joseph had in his possession read.