

**NEGOTIATING CULTURAL CAPITAL:
Politics of the Body in Translations, Transmediations and Receptions of the Bible**

Throughout centuries of Western civilizations several vernacular bibles have proven their ability to serve as culturally iconic texts. The Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate became foundational texts for the Eastern and Western Roman empires respectively, while the German *Lutherbibel* and the English *King James Version* came to dominate respective portions of Protestant movements. For an historian of Western bibles, it is evident that each of these versions underwent a number of adjustments in the process: each was fabricated so as to reflect and transcode cultural and social values and perceptions of respective periods and cultures, and each were woven into specific indigenous fabrics of reception and commentary. In this sense there are considerable differences between the location these four iconic bibles occupied in their respective cultures. But they all have one thing in common: they serve as potent specimens of (historically distinct) cultural capital. This, along with the fact that all these icons were branded under the same name – the Bible – has generated an idea in everyday language and perception of a Christian culture that is somehow coherent or continuous. Apparently, even after centuries of secularization in Europe, biblical values and texts could still be mustered in political rhetoric to serve as icons for European or national identity, especially in times of cultural confrontation. And among the more active groups still using biblical literature, the cultural value and location of vernacular bibles are ever-more important factors for national bible societies producing ever-new translations of this cultural icon.

Seen from historical distance, versions like the Vulgate or the King James Version appear as timeless standards. However, the sense of such translated bibles as localised cultural capital becomes all the more visible in processes where biblical literature is translated into new languages – usually as part of some Christian missionary discourse. The point of departure of this research project –featuring scholars from various research disciplines: Anthropology, History of Religions, Semiotics, Translation Studies and Theology – is to study historical and contemporary Bible translations in European and major non-European cultures and languages: American, South Asian, Arabic, African, Chinese, Korean and Nordic. The aim is to study how various translations codify cultural values and hence become sites for negotiation and distribution of cultural power.

One important analytical notion in the project is ‘core concept’; a concept that occupies the centre of related key concepts. For instance, in Quechua mathematics, the core concept “add” encompasses key concepts like “augment”; “increase”; “extend”; “unite”.¹ Similarly, this project intends to see politics of the body in Bible translation through the core concept “**liberation**”, which is associated with key concepts like “gender”, “slavery”, “health” and “salvation” (“redemption”). The project studies passages in various Bible translations containing these and interconnected concepts to learn how these are disseminated to novel cultural, socio-political and linguistic contexts. We will also explore how target cultures have received, adapted and used these concepts for different purposes.

As one example, take the biblical concept “salvation”. The biblical source languages (Hebrew and Greek) had obvious bodily connotations in this concept: The Hebrew root *yasha*‘ in the relevant stem means “to assist”, “to help”, “to save”, and the Greek verb (*sōzō*) translates “to heal” and “to save”. Especially in post-Enlightenment Protestant European perception “salvation” has primarily metaphysical connotations. This European perception of “salvation” often becomes contested during translation of the Bible to South American, African, or Asian languages. The introduction of new perceptions of the body embedded in Protestant theology becomes evident when translators of the Bible introduce European medical perceptions and services that defy local therapeutic philosophies, symbols and practice systems.

In recent years, missionaries attempt to disseminate or rather “transmediate” the gospel into new media, such as the highly ambitious “The JESUS Film Project” (<http://www.jesusfilm.org>) – a two hours film based upon the translated Gospel of Luke and published openly on the Internet. Intimately connected with analysis of the textual translation and appropriation of the Bible, the research group aims to examine this novel semiotic phenomenon of representing scripture and the politics of the body.

In short, translations of the Bible promote conceptual worlds deeply embedded in specific religious, cultural, socio-political and linguistic conventions. In this process Christianity becomes localised and in many cases appears as hybrid religion in culturally complex situations. Still, transcribing these localised concepts as ‘the Holy Bible’, Bible missionaries confirm a widely shared sense of Christianity as a coherent and unified

¹ Urton, Gary with the collaboration of Primitivo Nina Llanos. *The Social Life of Numbers. A Quechua Ontology of Numbers and Philosophy of Arithmetic*. University of Texas Press. Austin. 1997.

religion. They also entrench the position of the Bible as cultural capital, thereby verifying it as a site for promoting certain cultural values often transcribed as “Christian”. Detail insight into these processes also have implications for common perception of Christendom as a unified religious and cultural domain. Through ethnographic field research, historical and contemporary philological explications and semiotics, the research group will together analyse the processes and politics (ideology, institutions, and practices) of Christian translator (“global”) and target cultures (“local”) transmission, negotiation, interexchange and reception of religious knowledge as cultural capital.