A variety of choices

Religious languages

There are many different types of religious language. Primarily there is the language of the Bible, but there are also the languages of religious ceremonies, of hymns, of prayers and the language of preaching.

This section will concentrate on biblical language. The Bible includes many different types of language in itself. Although it is mainly narrative, there is also poetry in the form of the Psalms and the Song of Songs. There is the language of preaching in Ecclesiastes and homilies in Proverbs, the language of letters in Paul's Epistles and liturgy in Leviticus. Within the Bible there is a wide variety of books with a diverse range of language, contexts and purposes.

Translations

The Bible originally existed in Hebrew (the Old Testament) and Greek (the New Testament), both of which were transcribed into Latin to circulate within the Roman Empire and Medieval Christendom.

After initial resistance by the Catholic Church, there developed many English translations of the Bible over the years. No general survey of linguistic features can cover them all so the focus here is to examine the features that apply to the *King James Bible* (first published in 1611), with some reference to recent modern versions. The *KJB* was hugely influential on subsequent translations and people's familiarity with it meant that it influenced the English Language as a whole.

The translators' aims

Since the Reformation it has been the intention of translating committees to:

❖ Make the Bible accessible to the Christian population
❖ Reflect accurately the meaning of the original texts
❖ Maintain religious traditions
❖ Uphold the significance of the text and its place in spiritual life.

There are some tensions between these aspects. Most translations strive for a balance between accessibility, accuracy, tradition and gravity. Until recent times the majority of translations of the Bible have been conservative and tended to use traditional features of language in order to follow the tradition of earlier translators. The aim of translators down the ages has been to translate the Bible accurately rather than be innovative in use of language.

Language features

Register

The Bible is a formal text. The language of the *KJB* is some of the most formal language contemporary readers encounter. It can be compared with legal language in this respect. Its formality echoes the importance of its place in cultural and spiritual life, as well as the significance of its message. As the original translation is 400 years old it is necessarily going to seem old-fashioned.

The mode of the Bible is clearly that of a written text, but the Bible has always been read aloud. In the days before general literacy, listening to the Bible in this way would have been most people's experience. People's familiarity with the Psalms (which were originally used as Jewish hymns) came through their use within the liturgy, when they were frequently chanted or sung/intoned.

As a result the English language is full of sayings from the *KJB*. Over three hundred are listed at http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/sayings/?q=&submit=Go. David Crystal in his book *Begat* claimed that 257 sayings were coined by the *KJB* translators, while others came from earlier translations.

Lexis

The subject matter of the Bible is very varied, but there are recognisable lexical fields.

Subject specific lexis

There is specifically religious language. There are proper nouns like 'God' and 'Jesus' and common nouns such as 'disciples' and 'parables'. There are a number of formulaic noun phrases like, 'only begotten Son', 'Almighty God'. These are found so frequently that each could be termed a collocation. They are often so well understood that the adjective may be used on its own as in 'the Almighty', which is then used as a noun. There are also formal phrases associated with this version of the Bible such as, 'And it came to pass,' and, 'Let there be light'.

Abstract nouns and moral ideas

The Bible is a book of spiritual and moral ideas and so contains abstract nouns like 'faith', 'evil' and 'goodness'. There are also adjectives of moral judgment e.g. 'wicked', 'righteous'. These are developed into significant concepts of faith (eg. 'seeking after righteousness').

Archaic language

KJB is 400 years old and so contains lexis no longer in current use. Words like 'multitude' and 'victuals' have been replaced in modern versions with 'crowd' and 'food'. There is also a term like 'offering' where the idea has fallen out of use. An offering was a sacrifice given to God and was part of the sacrificial element of the Old Testament. As a result the collocation 'burnt offering' developed. In the New Testament 'offering' became something much more spiritual with the sacrificial death of Jesus, often referring to self-giving.

Semantics

Lexical items in *KJB* have often undergone semantic change. 'Charity' has been translated as 'love' in more recent translations. What Paul meant in

1 Corinthians 13 was unselfish love ('agape' in Greek). 'Charity' has undergone a narrowing of meaning and now generally means 'giving to the poor' or 'generosity'. However, the term 'love' has many meanings and in contemporary usage often focuses principally on romantic love ('eros' in Greek). Neither term conveys the meaning as well as the original Greek.

Symbolism

Language in the Bible is often used in a highly symbolic way. Many biblical stories express spiritual concepts in the narrative and through their symbolism:

- ❖ The story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 is not just the story of two individuals but of humanity. The fruit that Eve eats represents temptation and not just food
- ❖ 'Harvest' is a very frequent term in the Bible, partly because many ancient Near Eastern societies were agrarian. Literally, it demonstrated God's provision of food. Used as a metaphor, 'harvest' represented God's goodness and gift to his people. In Matthew ch.9 Jesus enjoins his followers to pray to the 'Lord of the harvest', referring to the spiritual concept of a 'harvest' of souls
- ❖ Psalm 23 also uses the language of a pastoral society. The idea of the familiar shepherd becomes a metaphor showing how God cares for his people, while references to 'green pastures' and 'still waters' take on an abstract connotation
- ❖ The *Song of Songs* is full of the imagery of cultivation, mentioning 'fruit', 'apples' and 'raisins', many of which are used as images of human beauty and sexual attraction.

Grammar

The register of the majority of translations of the Bible is formal or ultra-formal. This means that there are likely to be certain grammatical features.

Sentences

There are often long and complex sentences e.g.

> 3 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; [4]who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 *KJB*)

There is also a tendency in the *KJB* to link together simple sentences into long co-ordinated strings, which make the structure seem complex, and to mix together co-ordinating and subordinating clauses e.g.

> So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest. (Ruth 1: 22 *KJB*)

This might reflect the idea that it used to be considered higher status to have more complex 'intelligent' sentences. This contrasts to the modern move towards informalisation, where clarity in sentence construction is paramount.

Syntax

There is also the issue of syntax or word order. *KJB* Ecclesiastes 3: 1 begins:

> To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

It is translated in TNIV as:

> There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

The more modern translation is faithful to much of the syntax, but changes the word order at the start of the sentence to one more common today. We are less likely to begin a sentence with a preposition such as 'to' and are more likely to use the standard sentence opening 'there is'.

'Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes' (Genesis 22: 4 *KJB*) shows a fairly typical inversion of subject and predicate.

Verbs

The Bible has a strong moral purpose. Much of it is instruction. As a result you would expect to see imperative verbs and modal auxiliaries.

In the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6-21 KJB) there are examples of the use of both types of verbs:
- ❖ 'Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy,' where 'Observe' is an example of an imperative
- ❖ 'You shall have no other gods before me.' where 'shall' is an example of a modal auxiliary. This is essentially a command but expressed in a less emphatic way.

There are also archaic verb formations in *KJB*, particularly in the formation of questions and negatives e.g. 'Intreat me not' (Ruth 1:16) and 'Why then call ye me Naomi?' (Ruth 1:21).

There is frequent use of the auxiliary verb 'do' e.g. 'He did go', whereas today this would only be used for emphasis.

Inflections

In Middle English inflections were a common way to indicate grammatical features like tense in verbs or number in nouns. By Early Modern English (the language in which the *KJB* was translated) these were reducing in number, but they are still frequently seen in the *KJB*. Inflections are still

found in verbs, particularly in the endings. Very common is the ending '-eth' on third person singular verbs e.g. 'worketh', 'maketh', 'doeth' (Ecclesiastes 3:9-14 *KJB*).

Pronouns
In *KJB* there are many examples of archaic forms of pronouns; specifically 'thee', 'thou' and 'ye' for the various forms of 'you'.

Vocatives
God is often addressed directly. This is seen in the Psalms e.g.' Thou anointest my head with oil' (Psalm 23:5 KJB) and 'And he said, O LORD God of my master Abraham, I pray thee' (Genesis 24:12 *KJB*). This direct address of the latter conveys a sense of the immediate presence of God.

Graphology/orthography
The Bible is traditionally divided into books, chapters and verses. This is the form of the *KJB*. Newer translations often have sub-headings which indicate subject matter e.g. Matthew 14 in the *Good News Bible* has the sub-headings 'Jesus feeds the five thousand' and 'Jesus walks on the water'.

Discourse
The organisation of the text is very important in the Bible. Literary and rhetorical devices are often used to reinforce the message and make it memorable. Phonetic patterning is also important as it was so often read aloud.

The use of **repetition** is important. In Ecclesiastes 3 in the *KJB* there is both lexical and structural repetition, as in:

> A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; Ecclesiastes 3:2

There is the use of **parallelism** in this on-going list and there is also the use of **antithesis** to make the ideas universal. A similar technique is used in 1 Corinthians 13:
'Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth' (1 Corinthians 13:6 TNIV)

There are phrases or words which are often used as key **markers** of the narrative, adding to their significance. Both the stories of Ruth in Ruth 1 and Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 in *KJB* begin with 'And it came to pass'. There are over four hundred examples of this phrase being used in *KJB*. This would signify to a listening audience the start of a story worthy of their attention, a construction particularly associated with the oral tradition in which Bible stories were first preserved. A modern equivalent might be the 'Once upon a time' of fairy tales.

Lists of names are often found in the Old Testament, which emphasise the historical aspect. They act as a chronicle of the origins of the Jewish people. Genesis 11 contains a list of the descendants of Noah, often using the archaism 'begat':

> [26]And Terah lived seventy years, and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran. [27]Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. Genesis 11:26-7 KJB

The message

The importance of the Bible lies in its message. Christians generally regard it as a trustworthy record of God's interaction with his people and therefore of profound significance. The Bible is constructed in such a way as to persuade people to accept its teachings, thereby promoting its spiritual values. The language is a function of this. It is intended to be forceful and memorable. The success of its memorability is shown

by the number of sayings from the Bible, particularly from the *KJB*, which has passed into general usage.

However, the Bible is also a diverse collection of texts, which has developed over many centuries in varying contexts and for different purposes. It contains different genres which have their own frames of reference: legal guidelines, passionate love poetry, moral wisdom, visionary prophecy, plaintive laments, historical narrative etc.

This library of texts has an important historical function and provides a record of events from the past, which forms part of the basis for the three mono-theistic world religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Its authenticity is also important, although the different audiences for the Bible will view its authenticity in different ways. For some it represents absolute historical truth, while for others the symbolic nature of its message is more important.