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Syntactic differences between Gothic and Greek in Wulfila's translation of the Bible

In our paper we are going to concentrate upon the analysis of Gothic, the oldest literary language of Germania. We will take into account text samples of the Gothic Bible, namely, chapters Luke 1 and 2, as well as Matthew 6 and 8, and compare them with the original Greek text. The Gothic version of the Bible is based upon the Greek Bible and it is said to be a word for word translation of it. The translation was done by an Arian bishop named Wulfila who lived in the years c. 311–382 A.D. Although the Gothic text seems to be a literal translation of the original text, we found some areas where Gothic and Greek deviate from each other as far as syntax is concerned. It is those areas of difference that we are going to discuss.

1. Introduction

To begin with, it is a known fact that the translation of the Greek Bible into the Gothic language is a word for word translation whereby the target language (Gothic) slavishly follows the source text (biblical Greek). One can arrive at this conclusion even after having a casual look at the parallel Gothic and Greek lines of the Gothic Bible which was translated from Greek by bishop Wulfila in the fourth century after the birth of

Christ. This translation probably came into being from the conviction, or perhaps fear that the original message contained in the Bible must not by any means be distorted by the translator. The conviction that the target text must perfectly reflect the source text, therefore, was a mistaken one because in order to understand a word for word translation one needs to have at least some basic knowledge of the source language (in this case classical or biblical Greek) from which the translation is done. It so happens that any kind of translation is usually directed to people who have little or no knowledge of the source language. Otherwise no translation would be necessary; one needs to bear in mind that at that time there were very few people that had access to some kind of educational institution that would have enabled them to gain some knowledge of the Greek language. Nevertheless, Wulfila allowed himself some freedom during the translation process and sometimes Gothic deviates from Greek and in this way betrays some of its indigenous characteristics to the historical linguist. And it is about those points of difference that we are going to occupy ourselves with in this paper. We basically concentrate upon syntactic differences, such as the position of the object with respect to the verb, and the position of the modifier with respect to the modified element. First we are going to talk about some isolated cases where Gothic and Greek differ and then we will assume a more general approach based on the analysis of the text samples as a whole.

2. Points of difference: isolated cases

We will start our analysis with an example that is very interesting because of the fact that the author of the Gothic Bible decided to use a different expression here to convey the same meaning expressed by a different expression in Greek. This slight difference is very important to us, as the pronominal object following an intransitive verb occurs in Gothic in a structure that is not a word for word translation from Greek. Let us have a look at example 1 below:

1. bi biuhtja gudjinassaus **hlauts imma urrann** du saljan, atgaggands in alh frauojins

(Luke 1:9)

κατὰ τὸ ἔθος τῆς ἱερατείας ἔλαχε τοῦ θυμιᾶσαι εἰσελθών εἰς τὸν ναὸν τοῦ κυρίου

'According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord'¹

We can see that in the bold-typed Greek expression, unlike in the Gothic one, there is no pronominal object whatsoever and the expression used there seems to be much like the 'to-infinitive' in Old English. Moreover, on the basis of this example, which contains sort of an idiomatic expression, we can infer that, if it had not been for the widespread influence of Greek, Gothic would look quite different and in would be much more 'Germanic' in the sense that there would be more objects (at least pronominal ones) occurring before the verb than after it, and the more so in dependent clauses. This opinion seems to be confirmed by other Gothic expressions that are not a word for word translation from Greek. In the example below the author of the Gothic Bible seems not to have had a ready-made Gothic equivalent of the Greek word *λεπρός* 'a leper'. He therefore appears to have invented the expression 'Prutsfill habands', which is a periphrastic description of the Greek word in question. However, this example tells us something about Gothic. Namely, in the Gothic expression the object is placed in front of the verb which in fact is a present participle; it should be noticed that this expression is much of a 'connectorless' dependent clause, and dependent clauses in Germanic preferred to place the object in front of the verb. Would such examples, therefore, be in favour of Gothic being an OV language? Probably yes. Let us have a look at the example below then:

2. jah sai, manna **þrutsfill habands** durinnands inwait ina qibands...
 (Matthew 8:2)
 καὶ ἰδοὺ **λεπρός** προσελθών προσεκύνει αὐτῷ λέγων...
 'And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying...'

On the other hand, however, there are other 'innovative' examples in Gothic in which the object occurs after the verb and thus speak in favour of its being a VO language; the innovation consists in the use of objects in

¹ All the Gothic and Greek parallel examples and their translation have been taken from:
<http://www.wulfila.be/gothic/>

Gothic although there are no objects in the Greek text. Let us have a look at the examples below:

3. jah ni **bigitandona ina** gawandidedun sik in Iairusalem sokjando-na ina

(Luke 2:45)

καὶ μὴ εὑρόντες ὑπέστρεψαν εἰς ἵερον σαλὴμ ἀναζητοῦντες αὐτὸν
‘And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem,
seeking him’

4. **þugkeiþ im** auk ei in filuwaurdein seinai andhausjaindau

(Matthew 6.7)

δοκοῦσιν γὰρ ὅτι ἐν τῇ πολυλογίᾳ φαύτων εἰσακουσθήσονται
‘for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking’

5. jah was managei beidandans Zakariins, jah sildaleikidedun **hva lati-dedi ina** in þizai alh

(Luke 1:21)

καὶ ἦν ὁ λαὸς προσδοκῶν τὸν ζαχαρίαν, καὶ ἐθαύμαζον ἐν τῷ χρονίζειν
ἐν τῷ ναῷ αὐτὸν

‘And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple’

We would like to remark at this point that it is such Gothic innovations that result in slight differences between Greek and Gothic. These differences basically concern dependent clauses and, as will be seen later, it is in this type of clauses that the two texts differ particularly. To continue, there are other examples in Gothic that have VO word order configurations, and thus again speak in favour of its being VO, whereas their Greek counterparts are in fact OV, as in 6 and 7 below:

6. ni manna mag twaim fraujam skalkinon; unte jabai **fijaiþ ainana**,
jah anþarana frijoþ

(Matthew 6:24)

οὐδεὶς δύναται δυσὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν: ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἔνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν
ἔτερον ἀγαπήσει

‘No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other’

7. hvileiks ist sa, ei jah windos jah marei **ufhausjand imma?**
(Matthew 8:27)
ποταπός ἐστιν οὗτος ὅτι καὶ οἱ ἄνεμοι καὶ ἡ θάλασσα **αὐτῷ ὑπακούουσιν**
'What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey
him'

In order to arrive at some more objective conclusions as to the behaviour of objects with respect to verbs it would be necessary to take into account much larger corpora, or ideally the whole Gothic Bible, and then to gather all of the differences between Gothic and Greek and observe some regularities.

Now we will leave the question of the behaviour of objects aside and deal with the behaviour of noun modifiers. As was the case with the placement of objects, on the basis of the small corpus we can say that it is very hard to arrive at some conclusive data with respect to the position of noun modifiers, as their behaviour is quite unpredictable. On the one hand they precede the noun in Gothic and thus deviate from the original Greek text, as can be seen in the example below:

8. jah hairdjos wesun in **þamma samin landa...** (Luke 2:8)
καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ...
'And there were in the same country shepherds...'

On the other hand, they follow the noun and also deviate from the Greek text, as in the examples below:

9. jah aipei is gafastaida **þo waurda alla** in hairtin seinamma
(Luke 2:51)
καὶ ἡ μῆτηρ αὐτοῦ διετήρει πάντα τὰ ρήματα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς
'but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart'

10. iþ þu fastands salbo **haubiþ þein** jah **ludja þeina** þwah
(Matthew 6:17)
σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἄλειψαι σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου
νίψαι
'But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face'

11. jah suns hrain warþ þata þrutsfill is
 καὶ εὐθέως ἐκαθαρίσθη αὐτοῦ ἡ λέπρα
 'And immediately his leprosy was cleansed'
- (Matthew 8:3)
12. frauja, ni im wairþs ei **uf hrot mein** inngaggais, ak þatainei qip wau-
 rda jah gahailniþ sa þiumagus meins
 κύριε, οὐκ εἰμὶ ἴκανὸς ἵνα μου ὑπὸ τὴν στέγην εἰσέλθης: ἀλλὰ μόνον
 εἰπὲ λόγω, καὶ ἰαθήσεται ὁ παῖς μου
 'Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but
 speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed'
- (Matthew 8:8)

It needs to be said, however, that we found more examples of the latter than of the former. Such findings would therefore speak more in favour of Gothic being an VO language rather than OV. There are also other syntactic differences in Gothic but we are not going to concentrate upon them in this paper. Suffice it to say that they mainly concern the use of the passive voice in Gothic where Greek uses the active voice, as well as differences in the position of the verb with respect to the subject.

3. A more general approach

So far we have discussed some isolated cases where there are word order differences in Gothic and Greek. It needs to be reminded that these examples have been taken out of a very limited text corpus and thus are not very representative and any conclusions drawn on their basis must be treated with some distance because no striking regularities can be observed there. In order to get a more objective picture of the whole situation and search for more regularities it would be necessary to analyse the whole of the Gothic Bible and not only four chapters. Nevertheless, it was possible to objectivise the data even on the basis of the four chapters in question. We did so by tagging the entire texts for computer analysis of different word order configurations. In table 1 we present the data that we obtained in this way.

It is interesting to see here that main clause word order in Gothic generally goes hand in hand with the word order found in the parallel Greek text. There are as many as 98 percent of pronominal objects and 76 percent

of nominal objects that occur after the verb in both texts. In other words, the main clause word order in the Gothic Bible is basically an imitation of the word order found in the Greek Bible. As far as dependent clause word order is concerned, it can be seen that Gothic deviates a bit from Greek. In Gothic there are 95 percent and in Greek there are 87.5 percent of pronominal objects that appear after the verb. As for nominal objects, in Gothic there are 84 percent and in Greek there are 80 percent of them appearing after the verb. This difference is very important for us because it testifies to the fact that there is something going on in dependent clauses, namely, that although Greek has basically VO word order here, Gothic prefers this word order even more. It is very surprising to us to see more VO dependent clause word order configurations in Gothic than in Greek. Previous to the analysis we expected to obtain data that would have been in favour of a reverse situation, since Gothic is a Germanic language and Germanic languages generally preferred OV configurations in dependent clauses.

Table 1. Gothic and Greek: synchronic comparison of the behaviour of all kinds of objects

VO word order configurations							
main clauses				dependent clauses			
	all VO	pronominal Vo	nominal VO		all VO	pronominal Vo	nominal VO
Gothic	87.17%	98.80%	76.62%	Gothic	88%	95%	84.37%
Greek	87.09%	98.80%	76.25%	Greek	82.60%	87.5%	80.64%
main clauses				dependent clauses			
	all OV	pronominal oV	nominal OV		all OV	pronominal oV	nominal OV
Gothic	12.82%	1.19%	23.37%	Gothic	12%	5%	15.62%
Greek	12.90%	1.19%	23.75%	Greek	17.39%	12.5%	19.35%

4. Conclusions

According to our analysis, Gothic seems to have been a VO language even in dependent clauses because it does not seem to observe the rules that apply to the position of the object in the dependent clauses of such old Germanic languages as Old High German or Old English. This observation, however, is based on a Gothic language that in fact is a language that was

artificially employed in the process of Bible translation, and thus we cannot say to what extent this language reflects the Gothic language used by the native speakers of Gothic in natural everyday situations. Nevertheless, we can risk saying that since it was a Germanic language, it must have placed the object more often before the verb in dependent clauses than in main clauses, unless this characteristic feature of West-Germanic developed only after the separation of Gothic, an East-Germanic language, from the rest of the Germanic branch of languages, which, in turn, would imply that Gothic did not have this dependent clause feature at all and was a paratactic language, or to use other words, was a continuation of Proto-Germanic in the sense that it still did not develop hypotactic constructions. Another possibility is that Gothic was influenced by some non-Germanic languages of the East that did not make any distinction between the placement of the object in main and dependent clauses. No matter what the circumstances, we can be sure that Greek had a significant impact upon the Gothic word order and there is no question about it. In order to arrive at more representative data it is necessary to tag all of the Gothic Bible, select more parallel Greek and Gothic examples, and then compare the data. Such global approach would certainly allow one to observe more regularities as to word order differences in Greek and Gothic, which in turn could probably have stronger implications for what the true Gothic word order looked like.

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