

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 2 July 1997

From: Research Department

Request for Guidance on Translation

In its email message dated 13 May 1997, the National Spiritual Assembly of ... asked whether a compilation regarding principles governing translations of the Holy Text from English to a third language exists. This query was referred to the Research Department and we attach a selection of materials for its perusal.

It might be well to explain to the National Assembly that these materials have been created over the past twenty years or so in response to queries from National Assemblies, Publishing Trusts, or individual believers, and each item has been tailored to answer a particular need. As they study these materials, the friends will find that a number of quotations are repeated, and a few may not be directly relevant to the needs of the ... community. However, each document also sets forth quotations or comments not contained in the others, and it was felt that it would be useful for the National Assembly to have all of them.

Additionally, four other letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice contain advice about translation which the National Assembly may well find useful. We provide the relevant excerpts below.

In most languages each word has a range of meanings and also a penumbra of connotations. Certain of these overlap, giving rise to synonyms which are interchangeable in some contexts but not in others. It is seldom that there is an exact correspondence between the range of meanings and connotations of a word in one language and those of its nearest equivalent in another language. This lack of correspondence is particularly evident between the words of languages used in widely separate parts of the world or in very different cultures.

The House of Justice feels, therefore, that to construct a rigid list of Dutch words which are always used to translate certain other English words would not only be unnecessary but definitely misleading. As the beloved Guardian pointed out, the word "Bahá" signifies at once the "Glory", the "Splendour" and the "Light" of God; there is no single word in English which can express all these. Thus, as you have noted, it is translated as "Glory" in the use "Bahá'u'lláh", while in the list of the months, where "Jalál", the second month, is translated "Glory", "Bahá" is translated "Splendour". All translations are, to some degree, inadequate.

Those who are entrusted with the task of translating the Sacred Writings from the original into English should study the original very closely, and then attempt to express as accurately and as beautifully as possible in English that which the original conveys. To do this they frequently have to use various different synonyms in English to give the best translation of the same Arabic or Persian word when it appears in different contexts.

Conversely, they may have to use the same English word in different contexts to translate various different words in the original. In doing this they attempt to follow the example set by Shoghi Effendi in his magnificent translations.

The House of Justice suggests that, although your committee should, of course, follow the instruction of the Guardian to make your translations into Dutch from the English translations rather than from the original Persian or Arabic, you may find it helpful to consult Persian believers who are well-versed in Dutch and who could check with the original Texts for you. This could help you to make the correct choice of word in Dutch when the English wording seems ambiguous.

(31 May 1981 to a National Translation Committee)

On 30 August 1983 Mr. ... wrote to the Universal House of Justice concerning translation of the Guardian's writings into ... Some of the points that he raised are germane to your situation when making translations into Norwegian. We therefore share them with you here.

It should be pointed out, that the difficulties involved in translating some of Shoghi Effendi's writings into ... are not difficulties of terminology, or vocabulary, but of syntax. ... is very rich in terms and concepts and it is especially fertile and flexible when it comes to creating new terms and derivations. The problem involved in translating Shoghi Effendi is, briefly, this: The structural patterns of ... are in some cases radically different from English. The strong inflectional character of ... makes it impossible to harmonize syntactically a long row of subordinate clauses of the type Shoghi Effendi uses so frequently.

In view of this I suggest that the paraphrasing problem be solved in this way: Sentences involving many relative clauses are, as far as possible, turned into principal sentences. A sentence beginning with a string of relative clauses, with the subject at the end, is reconstructed so that the subject comes first and then the subordinate clauses....

... In response to his enquiry we were instructed by the Universal House of Justice to send the following:

The process you illustrate in your letter is not, the House of Justice feels, paraphrasing or simplification of the Writings, but is merely the process of syntactical re-arrangement that is essential in almost all translations. In such cases one would not normally produce a re-arrangement in the original language and then translate that, but would re-arrange the words and phrases in the actual process of translation, so that the passage reads naturally and fluently in the language into which it is being cast.

The earlier correspondence on this subject had been carried on under the impression that the original would have to be radically simplified and paraphrased before it could be translated into ..., as it must be for some other languages. From what you say, this is not required for ..., therefore there is no special problem beyond those normally associated with all translations.

From this reply you can see that there would be no objection to your breaking the sentences into smaller ones when translating Shoghi Effendi's English into Norwegian. The important thing is to obtain a fluent rendering in good Norwegian that will convey, as closely as possible, the quality as well as the meaning of the original. This would seem to be the policy already adopted by your translation committee, as outlined in your letter. In this connection, we can share with you the following paragraph from a letter written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Finland on 12 August 1973:

We realise that translation is a very difficult task and that however good a translation is there are always differences of opinion, both as to accuracy and style. However, in translating Bahá'í Scripture it is important to remember that the style in the original is an exalted one and this aspect should not be lost when it is translated into other languages. It can be noted, for example, that when the beloved Guardian was making his translations into English he used a style that is far from being that of modern English usage but is admirably suited to the richness and imagery of the original.

(9 August 1984 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Translation is, indeed, a very difficult art, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained that, ideally, all translations of the Sacred Texts should be made by competent committees, rather than by individuals. At the present time, unfortunately, there is seldom in any country a large enough number of sufficiently skilled persons who can be called upon to constitute such committees, and the institutions of the Faith have to rely on the services of such individuals as they can find with adequate time and skill to undertake the arduous work of translation.

The Writings of the Faith are not in the nature of scientific treatises. One must remember that the Manifestation of God is using the inadequate instrument of human language to convey truths and guidance which can raise mankind high above its present level of development and understanding. He makes extensive use, therefore, of metaphor and simile, and often approaches a subject from several different points of view so that its various facets and implications can be better understood. It would not be possible, therefore, to compile a list of meanings for specific symbols, expressions and words, since they may vary in their implication from passage to passage.

The translation of a passage can seldom be an entirely faithful rendering of the original—one just has to strive to make it as faithful and befitting as possible. At the present time many of the translations of the Writings fall far below the desirable standard, especially in those languages spoken by a relatively small number of Bahá'ís, but time and an increase in the number of Bahá'ís who have a profound understanding of the Teachings as well as an exemplary command of the languages concerned will enable new and improved translations to be produced. For the time being we must do what we can with what we have.

(8 September 1985 to an individual)

Of course the most fundamental requirement for the attainment of a good translation is the availability of a translator who has not only a thorough understanding of

the original language, but also is able to write in clear and beautiful French, so that he can re-express in French not only the true meaning of the original, but can clothe it in language which appropriately reproduces in the French idiom the beauty of style of the original. While a literal translation is almost inevitably a bad translation, the translator must guard against departing from or adding to the meaning of the original even though he may have to use a phrase to translate a word, or reduce a phrase in the original to one word in the French, or recast the order of a sentence, or replace a metaphor which would be meaningless if translated literally by an equivalent one which conveys the same meaning. In translating Shoghi Effendi's writings in particular you may find that many of his long sentences, which are perfectly clear in English, are impossible in French and must be divided into shorter ones.

If there is no French-speaking Bahá'í with the requisite command of both English and French, or if such friends are over-burdened, you may most certainly employ non-Bahá'í translators. Here, however, you may face another problem, that of the translator's understanding of the Bahá'í teachings which underlie the words. It would be essential for you to have such translations carefully checked by knowledgeable Bahá'ís, who can raise with the translator any passages which they feel convey the wrong meaning.

When you are having any of the Sacred Texts translated on the basis of authorized English translations, you should involve in the work one or more Bahá'ís who are fluent in French and are also familiar with the original Arabic or Persian. Thus, when the translator finds he is unable to grasp the exact meaning of the English words, his understanding can be illuminated by reference to the original texts.

(2 December 1988 to a Publishing Trust)

GUIDELINES FOR THE TRANSLATION OF BAHÁ'Í SACRED WRITINGS

- 1) Translations into languages other than those akin to Persian and Arabic should normally be made from approved English translations rather than from the original Persian and Arabic. In such cases it is an advantage if it is possible for the translator(s) to also check with the original.
- 2) All new translations into English, and all revisions of earlier translations in that language, must be checked at the World Centre and officially approved before publication.
- 3) Any believer is free to translate for his own use anything he wishes, but dissemination or publication of such translations is dependent upon their approval by the appropriate National Spiritual Assembly or, in the case of translations into English, by the World Centre.
 - a) If an individual Bahá'í spontaneously makes his own translation of a passage, he may willingly make it available to a Spiritual Assembly, but he cannot be compelled to do so.
 - b) If a translation made spontaneously by an individual is approved and published, he retains the copyright of his translation, unless, of course, he wishes to surrender it.
- 4) When a Spiritual Assembly wishes to have a translation made it should, if possible, have the task undertaken by a committee rather than by individuals, as explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.
 - a) The members of such a committee need not all be Bahá'ís.
 - b) Translations made by a committee are the property of the Assembly appointing the committee, and not of the members of the committee.
 - c) Except for translations into English, a translation made by a committee does not have to be checked unless the Assembly deems it advisable.
 - d) In accordance with the instructions of Shoghi Effendi the name of the committee should appear in the book as the translator, but the names of the members should not so appear.
- 5) If it is not feasible to form a translation committee, translations must, perforce, be made by individuals.
 - a) When an individual is commissioned by an Assembly to make a translation, the translation becomes the property of the Assembly, not of the individual, even if the work is done without remuneration. It is advisable to have this and other matters agreed in writing before the work is undertaken so that there may be no ground for subsequent misunderstandings.

- b) A translation made by an individual should, if possible, be checked before being published, and such checking should be done by a committee rather than by an individual, if this is feasible.
 - c) When a translation made by an individual is published, his name may appear as translator if he so wishes.
- 6) Normally credit for translation should appear on all complete works and compilations that are published, as well as on books that quote translated passages.
- a) Credit for translation should not appear in the case of passages quoted in communications from Bahá'í institutions, even when these are published.
 - b) Credit for translation need not appear on published leaflets and pamphlets unless it is legally required to do so.

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 18 September 1988

From: The Research Department

BAHÁ'Í TRANSLATION THEORY

The Research Department has studied the questions raised by Mr. ... in his letter of 19 July 1988. Mr. ... explained that he is working on his Ph.D. in the area of translation theory with a view to being better prepared to undertake the translation of the Writings into ... He poses a number of questions about Bahá'í translation theory. We provide the following comment and enclose a number of compilations that pertain to the general subject of translation.

1. The Theoretical Position Taken by Shoghi Effendi in His Translations

Mr. ... is particularly interested in the way in which the Guardian made his translations into English and his choice of a semi-Biblical style. Before addressing the specific questions it is important to note, in studying the Guardian's approach to translation, that his translations are, among other things, inseparable from the exercise of his function as the authorized interpreter of the Text. Therefore, there may be instances in which he departs from established academic traditions.

There are two sources which provide some description of Shoghi Effendi's general approach to translation. They are:

- Rúhíyyih Rabbani, "The Priceless Pearl" (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969). See pp. 196–97 and pp. 202–04.
- David Hofman, "George Townshend" (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983). Chapter 6, entitled "Relationship with the Guardian", outlines in detail the services rendered by Mr. Townshend in assisting the Guardian in his translation work with literary and stylistic questions.

To assist Mr. ... study of the subject we provide several compilations that relate to his area of interest. The compilations, entitled "Literary Style—Translation" (Enclosure 1) and "Translations" (Enclosure 2), were prepared earlier in response to slightly differing questions. Hence there is a degree of overlap between them. The third (Enclosure 3) consists largely of extracts from letters written by and on behalf of the Universal House of Justice and serves to supplement the material contained in the other compilations. From these materials it is possible to derive information about the following points:

a. General Statements about Translation

Principles of translation include:

- faithfulness to the original (Enclosure 1, “Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1982), p. 66; 29 October 1973)
- convey the spirit of the original (Enclosure 1, 28 March 1926)
- reflect the style of the original (Enclosure 1, 1 July 1985)
- preserve the musical sweetness of the original (Enclosure 3, “Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas”, vol. 1 (Chicago: Bahá’í Publishing Society, 1909), pp. 151–52)
- high literary standard and merit (Enclosure 1, 28 March 1926; 14 December 1938)
- should not flagrantly violate the rules of the language into which the literature is being translated (Enclosure 1, 8 November 1948; 15 February 1957)
- beauty (Enclosure 1, 31 May 1981)
- translation undertaken by a group of individuals (Enclosure 2, 15 July 1947)
- seek expert advice about technical literary problems (Enclosure 2, 14 March 1977)
- familiarity with oriental literature is important (Enclosure 3, 27 May 1982)
- guidance regarding the use of “Simple English” (Enclosure 3, 13 March 1969; 20 September 1973; 7 October 1973)

b. Shoghi Effendi’s Comments about His Own Translations

- his translation of “The Kitáb-i-Íqán” represents “one more attempt” to reach the “unattainable goal” of providing “a befitting rendering of Bahá’u’lláh’s matchless utterance” (Enclosure 1, Foreword to “The Kitáb-i-Íqán” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974))
- “Shoghi Effendi does not consider his own translations as final” (Enclosure 2, 14 August 1930)

c. Universal House of Justice’s Comments about Shoghi Effendi’s Translations, including Use of Biblical Language

- interpretative function (Enclosure 2, 8 December 1964)
- style is suited to the richness and imagery of the original (Enclosure 1, 12 August 1973; Enclosure 3, 3 February 1988)
- Biblical style (Enclosure 1, 29 October 1973; Enclosure 3, 7 October 1973; 1 July 1985; 3 February 1988)

2. The Bahá'í Concept of the Nature of the Language of the Sacred Text

Mr. ... observes that the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh have linked language (e.g., Letter, Word, Utterance) with creation and revelation. He asks to what extent this is to be taken literally and to what extent symbolically. To gain a deeper understanding of this subject, it is suggested that Mr. ... study the contexts in which such terms are used, e.g., in “Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh” (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), there are many sections (i.e., XXXIV, XLIII, LXX, LXXIV, etc.) that deal with the potency of the Word of God, its creative power and role in the regeneration and advancement of the world. In some of these sections the creative power of the Word appears synonymous with the spirit released by the revelation, in others, it appears to derive from the actions of the believers putting the teachings into practice in their lives.

Mr. ... explains that Western translators are divided between hermeneutic philosophers who view language, and therefore translation, as the essence from which reality is created, and functional linguists who view it as an instrument to express thoughts whose reality does not depend on language for their existence, and which can be expressed through adequate translation equally well. In light of these differing views he enquires whether there is a mystic power to the form of the words in the Arabic and Persian originals that is absent even in Shoghi Effendi's translations. While the Research Department has no specific expertise in the area of translation theory we provide the following references and comments which may assist Mr. ... in thinking about the issues he raises:

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stresses that translation is an inherently difficult task:

Truly translation is very difficult. One has to have the utmost proficiency in science and religion, in divine wisdom, in the current trends of thought in Europe, and in philosophical and scientific terms.

- The Universal House of Justice in a letter dated 8 September 1985 written on its behalf to an individual believer indicated that while the “translation of a passage can seldom be an entirely faithful rendering of the original”, we can confidently expect that the quality of translations will improve over time. The letter states:

The translation of a passage can seldom be an entirely faithful rendering of the original—one just has to strive to make it as faithful and befitting as possible. At the present time many of the translations of the Writings fall far below the desirable standard, especially in those languages spoken by a relatively small number of Bahá'ís, but time and an increase in the number of Bahá'ís who have a profound understanding of the Teachings as well as an exemplary command of the languages concerned will enable new and improved translations to be produced. For the time being we must do what we can with what we have.

- In a letter dated 27 March 1940 written on behalf of the Guardian in the Persian language the translation of the Tablet of Aḥmad from Arabic into Persian was discouraged and the Guardian used the analogy of the shell and the pearl to underline the contrast between the translation and the original Tablet.
- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá predicts that translations will be made “into every tongue” and that when executed “in conformity with the original” “the splendours of their inner meanings will

be shed abroad, and will illumine the eyes of all mankind". (See "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", p. 66)

- In "Some Answered Questions" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), chapter 16, "Outward Forms and Symbols must be used to convey Intellectual Conceptions", describes the importance of the word and imagery in conveying such "intellectual realities" as "love", "electricity", the "human spirit", etc.
- An article entitled "Some Themes and Images in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh" by B. Nakhjavání, which is published in "The Bahá'í World", volume XVI, pp. 670-74, deals with the use of language in the Writings.

3. The Ultimate Goal of Bahá'í Translation

Mr. ... indicates that the ultimate goal of translation of some Christian groups is to translate all of the Bible into all languages. He enquires as to the ultimate translation goal of the Faith. The Research Department has been unable to locate any reference in the Writings to this subject. There is, however, the statement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá cited above about the translation of the "Books and Tablets" of Bahá'u'lláh "into every tongue"; and from the goals of the Plans initiated by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, it is clear that the Faith places great emphasis not only on providing every believer with portions of the Holy Texts in his or her own language, but also on expanding the range and availability of literature in as many languages as possible.

With regard to the instructions of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran concerning the translation of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings in Arabic into Persian, the restriction applies particularly to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, prayers and the obligatory prayers. While it is not permissible to translate these Writings into Persian, it is possible to translate them into other languages, as indicated by the extract from a letter dated 14 December 1940 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma which states:

Regarding his instruction to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran to the effect that Bahá'u'lláh's writings in Arabic should not be translated into Persian: this applies to the translation of the revealed words into Persian only. Your Assembly, therefore, may proceed with its plan for the rendering of the Tablet of Aḥmad, the three daily obligatory prayers and other Tablets into Urdu.

In addition, the Universal House of Justice in a letter dated 7 August 1984 written on its behalf in Persian clarified that, while a complete Tablet or prayer should not be translated from Arabic into Persian, it is permissible to translate into Persian difficult Arabic terms and concepts in order to facilitate the understanding of the believers who do not have a mastery of the Arabic language.

As to the reason for discouraging the translation of Arabic Tablets, etc., into Persian, the Guardian stresses, in letters written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran, the efficacy of the original language and the importance of Persian Bahá'í children's being taught Arabic so that they can recite such Tablets and prayers in the original.

LITERARY STYLE—TRANSLATION

From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Regarding the translation of the Books and Tablets of the Blessed Beauty, ere long will translations be made into every tongue, with power, clarity and grace. At such time as they are translated, conformably to the originals, and with power and grace of style, the splendours of their inner meanings will be shed abroad, and will illumine the eyes of all mankind. Do thy very best to ensure that the translation is in conformity with the original.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, number 31.13)

From the writings of Shoghi Effendi and letters written on his behalf

This is one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation. The hope is that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá’u’lláh’s matchless utterance.

(Shoghi Effendi, Foreword to “The Kitáb-i-Iqán” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1985))

It must have been very distasteful to you to read some of the off-hand and ungrammatical translations that more out of necessity than choice won circulation and were even published. Furthermore, it was always the expressed wish and desire of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to have proper and adequate translations that would not only convey the true spirit of the original but also possess some literary merit. And for this he emphasized the necessity of a board of translators. Such a board it has unfortunately been impossible to form as yet.

(28 March 1926 to an individual believer)

Shoghi Effendi hopes that before long we will obtain a group of competent English and Persian scholars who would devote their whole time and energy to the translation of the Words and bring out things that are really deserving. For whatever we have at present, even the very best, is only a mediocre rendering of the Persian or Arabic beauty of style and fertility of language that we find in the original.

(4 July 1929 to an individual believer)

Shoghi Effendi wishes me also to express his deep-felt appreciation of your intention to study the Qur’án. The knowledge of this revealed holy Book is, indeed, indispensable to every Bahá’í who wishes to adequately understand the writings of Bahá’u’lláh. And in view of that the Guardian has been invariably encouraging the friends to make as thorough a study of this Book as possible, particularly in their Summer Schools. Sale’s translation is the most scholarly we have, but Rodwell’s version is more literary, and hence easier for reading.

(23 November 1934 to an individual believer)

He feels the highest literary standard possible should be maintained in any future translations of Bahá'í writings into Spanish, and for this reason he heartily welcomes the suggestion to refer such work to Spanish professors....

(14 December 1938 to an individual believer)

There is no objection to using, in translations of the Master's words, a uniform style such as "he does" or "he doeth". It certainly creates a ridiculous impression to use both. One or the other may be chosen.

In Persian it is impolite not to use the word "Ḥaḍrat" before the name of the Prophet, so that strictly speaking a proper translation should always have "His Holiness Moses" etc.; however, as this seems peculiar in English, and not in the best usage of our language, he feels it can be dispensed with. Pronouns referring to the Manifestation, or the Master, should, however, invariably be capitalized.

(8 November 1948 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Shoghi Effendi himself uses the King James version of the Bible, both because it is an authoritative one and in beautiful English.

(28 October 1949 to an individual believer)

He is interested in accomplishing two things—he would like in the European languages to have as much uniformity with the English translations as possible; he does not wish the Bahá'í translations to be in any way a flagrant violation of the rules of the language into which our literature is being translated.

Your Committee must conscientiously study this question, and then do the best you can to have the Bahá'í literature in French meet the high standards of the French language and grammar.

If the possessive and demonstrative adjectives and pronouns in French are never capitalized where they stand for "God", then this should not be done in the Bahá'í literature. If there is a precedent for doing so in the French language, however, they should be. The same is true of the attributes of God.

(15 February 1957 to the National Translation and Publication Committee of France)

From letters written by the Universal House of Justice

We realise that translation is a very difficult task and that however good a translation is there are always differences of opinion, both as to accuracy and style. However, in translating Bahá'í Scripture it is important to remember that the style in the original is an exalted one and this aspect should not be lost when it is translated into other languages. It can be noted, for example, that when the beloved Guardian was making his translations into English he used a style that is far from being that of modern English usage but is admirably suited to the richness and imagery of the original.

(12 August 1973 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

A translation should of course be as true as possible to the original while being in the best possible style of the language into which it is being translated. However, you should realize that it will not be possible to translate the Tablets adequately into easy, modern Dutch. Many of the original Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are written in very exalted and poetic Persian and Arabic and therefore a similar flavour should be attempted in the language into which it is translated. You will see, for example, that in translating the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh into English the beloved Guardian has created a very beautiful and poetic style in English using many words which might be considered archaic and are reminiscent of the English used by the translators of the King James version of the Bible.

As you point out, a literal translation is often a bad one because it can produce a phraseology or imagery that would convey the wrong impression, thus a translator is at times compelled to convey the meaning of the original by means of a form of words suited to the language. However, a person translating the Bahá'í Writings must always bear in mind that he or she is dealing with the Word of God, and, when striving to convey the meaning of the original, he should exert his utmost to make his rendering both faithful and befitting.

(29 October 1973 to an individual believer)

From letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

Those who are entrusted with the task of translating the Sacred Writings from the original into English should study the original very closely, and then attempt to express as accurately and as beautifully as possible in English that which the original conveys. To do this they frequently have to use various different synonyms in English to give the best translation of the same Arabic or Persian word when it appears in different contexts. Conversely, they may have to use the same English word in different contexts to translate various different words in the original. In doing this they attempt to follow the example set by Shoghi Effendi in his magnificent translations.

(31 May 1981 to a National Translation and Revision Committee of a National Spiritual Assembly)

Translation is a very difficult art—an art in which absolute perfection is unattainable. However good a translation, there will always be those who would have preferred it otherwise, for taste, which is undefinable, plays such a large part in such judgements.

(20 September 1982 to an individual believer)

From memoranda prepared by the Research Department at the instruction of the Universal House of Justice

The question of which style of Swedish should be used for the translation of Bahá'í Writings is one that, we feel, must be decided by the National Assembly of Sweden after considering the views of those who are expert both in translation and in Swedish literary style. While it is not obligatory for them to follow the practice that the beloved Guardian adopted in English, it would be useful for them to bear in mind certain aspects of the problem which have been solved in English by Shoghi Effendi.

The originals of the Bahá'í Writings are not only in three different languages (Arabic, Persian and a few in Turkish), which have very different characteristics, but are also in a number of different styles. Some are highly poetic and metaphorical, others more precise and specific. In English-speaking countries, as in most others, religion and spirituality are in a phase of eclipse; therefore the vocabulary used to convey many profound religious concepts has fallen into disuse. To attempt to express the highly poetic and allusive terminology of the Bahá'í Writings in plain, modern English would either be banal or would make the passages sound very strange and foreign. The Guardian's use of a style of English that is slightly archaic, a style in which there is an abundance of spiritual and poetic terminology, acts as a bridge between the English of today and the style of the Persian and Arabic Writings of the Founders of the Faith.

(1 July 1985 to the House of Justice from the Research Department for the Swedish Publishing Trust)

Those devoted believers who are currently engaged in translation work have a difficult task, for the originals of the Bahá'í Writings are not only in three different languages (Arabic, Persian, and a few in Turkish) but are also composed in a number of different styles. Some are highly poetic and metaphorical, others more precise and specific. The translators must study the original closely in order to attempt an accurate and beautiful rendition in English suitable for the style and language of the original text.

(27 May 1987 to an individual believer)

From "The Priceless Pearl"

THE WRITINGS OF THE GUARDIAN

In an age when people play football with words, kicking them right and left indiscriminately with no respect for either their meaning or correct usage, the style of Shoghi Effendi stands out in dazzling beauty. His joy in words was one of his strongest personal characteristics, whether he wrote in English—the language he had given his heart to—or in the mixture of Persian and Arabic he used in his general letters to the East. Although he was so simple in his personal tastes he had an innate love of richness which is manifest in the way he arranged and decorated various Bahá'í Holy Places, in the style of the Shrine of the Báb, in his preferences in architecture, and in his choice and combination of words. Of him it could be said, in the words of another great writer, Macaulay, that "he wrote in language ... precise and luminous." Unlike so many people Shoghi Effendi wrote what he meant and meant exactly what he wrote. It is impossible to eliminate any word from one of his sentences without sacrificing part of the meaning, so concise, so pithy is his style....

The language in which Shoghi Effendi wrote, whether for the Bahá'ís of the West or of the East, has set a standard which should effectively prevent them from descending to the level of illiterate literates which often so sadly characterizes the present generation as far as the use and appreciation of words are concerned. He never compromised with the ignorance of his readers but expected them, in their thirst for knowledge, to overcome their ignorance. Shoghi Effendi chose, to the best of his great ability, the right vehicle for his thought and it made no difference to him whether the average person was going to know the word he used or not. After all, what one does not know one can find out. Although he had such a brilliant command of language he frequently reinforced his knowledge by certainty through looking up the word he

planned to use in Webster's big dictionary. Often one of my functions was to hand it to him and it was a weighty tome indeed! Not infrequently his choice would be the third or fourth usage of the word, sometimes bordering on the archaic, but it was the exact word that conveyed his meaning and so he used it. I remember my mother once saying that to become a Bahá'í was like entering a university, only one never finished learning, never graduated. In his translations of the Bahá'í writings, and above all in his own compositions, Shoghi Effendi set a standard that educates and raises the cultural level of the reader at the same time that it feeds his mind and soul with thoughts and truth....

The supreme importance of Shoghi Effendi's English translations and communications can never be sufficiently stressed because of his function as sole and authoritative interpreter of the Sacred Writings, appointed as such by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will. There are many instances when, owing to the looseness of construction in Persian sentences, there could be an ambiguity in the mind of the reader regarding the meaning. Careful and correct English, not lending itself to ambiguity in the first place, became, when coupled with Shoghi Effendi's brilliant mind and his power as interpreter of the Holy Word, what we might well call the crystallizing vehicle of the teachings. Often by referring to Shoghi Effendi's translation into English the original meaning of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, or 'Abdu'l-Bahá becomes clear and is thus safeguarded against misinterpretation in the future. He was meticulous in translating and made absolutely sure that the words he was using in English conveyed and did not depart from the original thought or the original words. One would have to have a mastery of Persian and Arabic to correctly understand what he did....

The Guardian was exceedingly cautious in everything that concerned the original Word and would never explain or comment on a text submitted to him in English (when it was not his own translation) until he had verified it with the original.

(Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), pp. 196–204)

TRANSLATIONS

From letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

It must have been very distasteful to you to read some of the off-hand and ungrammatical translations that more out of necessity than choice won circulation and were even published. Furthermore, it was always the expressed wish and desire of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to have proper and adequate translations that would not only convey the true spirit of the original but also possess some literary merit. And for this he emphasized the necessity of a board of translators. Such a board it has unfortunately been impossible to form as yet.

(From a letter dated 28 March 1926 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

I am directed by Shoghi Effendi to acknowledge receipt of two chapters of the French translation of Dr. Esslemont’s book which you had sent him.

He has read them and is well pleased except that he wishes me to remind you and Mrs. ... not to attempt a too literal rendering because that is bound to affect the language of the French translation unfavourably. He wishes you rather to attempt a faithful rendering of the thought and meaning of the original in as good French as possible without of course deviating too much.

(From a letter dated 19 March 1930 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Concerning the different translations of the Words: It is surely the original text that should never be changed. The translations will continue to vary as more and better translations are made. Shoghi Effendi does not consider even his own translations as final, how much more translations made in the early days of the Cause in the West when no competent translators existed.

(From a letter dated 14 August 1930 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

You need not worry if the rendering is not absolutely correct. For the essential is that it should convey the Message in a fairly good and understandable language. In teaching literary considerations are, no doubt, important, but are quite secondary when compared to the ideas and thoughts constituting the Message itself.

(From a letter dated 14 October 1936 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

The decision reached by the National Spiritual Assembly concerning the matter of Spanish translations, he hopes, will be carried out promptly and vigorously, so as to avoid any further delay. He feels the highest literary standard possible should be maintained in any future translations of Bahá'í writings into Spanish, and for this reason he heartily welcomes the suggestion to refer such work to Spanish professors, even though this may involve some expenses which your Committee, or the National Spiritual Assembly, might find somewhat difficult to bear in the beginning.

(From a letter dated 14 December 1938 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

He attaches great importance to a suitable title for the book, and feels that you should not necessarily try to get a short one....

As you know, the concept embodied in the English words is very subtle ... a very powerful spiritual concept, but a beautiful term in the English language....

He cannot, alas, provide you with the originals of the less well-known quotations.

(From a letter dated 19 April 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

He does not believe there is anyone at present capable of translating the passages you referred to in the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá into befitting and accurate English. Arabic is especially difficult, and many of the Bahá'í writings will require a well-qualified group of translators, not just one person.

(From a letter dated 15 July 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

He is interested in accomplishing two things—he would like in the European languages to have as much uniformity with the English translations as possible; he does not wish the Bahá'í translations to be in any way a flagrant violation of the rules of the language into which our literature is being translated.

Your Committee must conscientiously study this question, and then do the best you can to have the Bahá'í literature in French meet the high standards of the French language and grammar.

If the possessive and demonstrative adjectives and pronouns in French are never capitalized where they stand for "God", then this should not be done in the Bahá'í literature. If there is a precedent for doing so in the French language, however, they should be. The same is true of the attributes of God.

(From a letter dated 15 February 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Translation and Publication Committee of a National Spiritual Assembly)

From letters written by the Universal House of Justice

The matter of translation is a major problem. As you yourself know only too well, to convey exactly the meaning and flavour of a passage from one language to another is often impossible and one can but labour to approach as near as possible to the unattainable perfection. Even our beloved Guardian, whose skill in this art amounted to genius, characterized his translation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán as “one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation” and he expressed the hope “that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá’u’lláh’s matchless utterance.”

The difficulty of translation increases when two languages express the thoughts and metaphors of widely differing cultures; thus, it is infinitely more difficult for a European to conceive the thought patterns expressed in Arabic or Persian than to understand a passage written in English. Moreover, the beloved Guardian was not only a translator but the inspired Interpreter of the Holy Writings; thus, where a passage in Persian or Arabic could give rise to two different expressions in English he would know which one to convey. Similarly he would be much better equipped than an average translator to know which metaphor to employ in English to express a Persian metaphor which might be meaningless in literal translation.

Thus, in general, speakers of other European tongues will obtain a more accurate translation by following the Guardian’s English translation than by attempting at this stage in Bahá’í history to translate directly from the original.

This does not mean, however, that the translators should not also check their translations with the original texts if they are familiar with Persian or Arabic. There may be many instances where the exact meaning of the English text is unclear to them and this can be made evident by comparison with the original....

You mention the goal of the Nine Year Plan concerning the collation of texts. This refers only to the gathering and correlation of the original writings and not to revisions of translations. The works already well translated into English or written in that language by the beloved Guardian are quite sufficient for the present time. Of course in other languages there are many goals for translation and publication of literature. In time, of course, old translations into English such as those of Tablets and Talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá will have to be revised, but we feel this is not as urgent as many other tasks.

(From a letter dated 8 December 1964 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

We realise that translation is a very difficult task and that however good a translation is there are always differences of opinion, both as to accuracy and style. However, in translating Bahá’í Scripture it is important to remember that the style in the original is an exalted one and this aspect should not be lost when it is translated into other languages. It can be noted, for example, that when the beloved Guardian was making his translations into English he used a style that is far from being that of modern English usage but is admirably suited to the richness and imagery of the original.

(From a letter dated 12 August 1973 written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

A translation should of course be as true as possible to the original while being in the best possible style of the language into which it is being translated. However, you should realize that it will not be possible to translate the Tablets adequately into easy, modern Dutch. Many of the original Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are written in very exalted and poetic Persian and Arabic and therefore a similar flavour should be attempted in the language into which it is translated. You will see, for example, that in translating the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh into English the beloved Guardian has created a very beautiful and poetic style in English using many words which might be considered archaic and are reminiscent of the English used by the translators of the King James version of the Bible.

As you point out, a literal translation is often a bad one because it can produce a phraseology or imagery that would convey the wrong impression, thus a translator is at times compelled to convey the meaning of the original by means of a form of words suited to the language. However, a person translating the Bahá'í Writings must always bear in mind that he or she is dealing with the Word of God, and, when striving to convey the meaning of the original, he should exert his utmost to make his rendering both faithful and befitting.

(From a letter dated 29 October 1973 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

From letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

You mention that there are no capital letters in Japanese; this is also the case in Persian and Arabic. It is permissible to use the proper noun in place of the personal pronoun if this is the accepted good standard in the Japanese language, as you say is done in translations of the Bible. The Guardian was always in favor of seeking the most expert advice in such problems and you would do well to present these technical literary problems to some professor of the Japanese language or some well-known and established translators.

(From a letter dated 14 March 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Translation and Review Committee of a National Spiritual Assembly)

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter enquiring about the translation of various words and synonyms, and has asked us to convey the following.

In most languages each word has a range of meanings and also a penumbra of connotations. Certain of these overlap, giving rise to synonyms which are interchangeable in some contexts but not in others. It is seldom that there is an exact correspondence between the range of meanings and connotations of a word in one language and those of its nearest equivalent in another language. This lack of correspondence is particularly evident between the words of languages used in widely separate parts of the world or in very different cultures.

The House of Justice feels, therefore, that to construct a rigid list of Dutch words which are always used to translate certain other English words would not only be unnecessary but definitely misleading. As the beloved Guardian pointed out, the word "Bahá" signifies at once the "Glory" the "Splendour" and the "Light" of God; there is no single word in English which can express all these. Thus, as you have noted, it is translated as "Glory" in the name "Bahá'u'lláh", while in the list of the months, where "Jalál" the second month, is translated "Glory", "Bahá" is translated "Splendour". All translations are, to some degree, inadequate.

Those who are entrusted with the task of translating the Sacred Writings from the original into English should study the original very closely, and then attempt to express as accurately and as beautifully as possible in English that which the original conveys. To do this they frequently have to use various different synonyms in English to give the best translation of the same Arabic or Persian word when it appears in different contexts. Conversely, they may have to use the same English word in different contexts to translate various different words in the original. In doing this they attempt to follow the example set by Shoghi Effendi in his magnificent translations.

(From a letter dated 31 May 1981 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Translation and Revision Committee of a National Spiritual Assembly)

Translation of the Sacred Text is indeed a vital matter, and as you yourself point out, the Guardian's translations are not simply literal, academic translations, but contain an element of exposition of the original Text, an exposition greatly amplified for the Bahá'í community and posterity by the great volume of Shoghi Effendi's other writings on the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh and the implications of His Revelation.

(From a letter dated 2 June 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

M E M O R A N D U M

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 24 October 1990

From: The Research Department

Committee for Translating the Sacred Writings

Maison d'Éditions Bahá'íes, in its electronic mail message of 11 October 1990, has inquired whether there is any mention in the Writings of the "ideal committee for the translation of the Holy Writings" and the qualities for the individual members of such a committee.

We have attached a selection of extracts from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and from letters written by or on behalf of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice on "Committees for Translating Bahá'í Sacred Writings". Not all of the extracts refer directly to the preferred characteristics of a translation committee, and some of them refer to situations not directly analogous to that of MEB, but the passages suggest several points which have implications for the selection and functioning of a translation committee. Among them are the following:

1. A translation committee is preferable to a single translator.
(Extracts 2, 3, 4, 8)
2. A committee should be composed of native speakers of both languages.
(Extracts 2, 3, 4)
3. All committee members should be proficient in both languages.
(Extracts 2, 3, 4)
4. Translators should have "the utmost proficiency in science and religion, in divine wisdom, in the current trends of thought in Europe, and in philosophical and scientific terms". (Extracts 1, 2)
5. Other scholars and thinkers, including non-Bahá'í experts, can assist after the committee prepares a translation. (Extracts 2, 10)
6. The translator should be a "writer" with "great eloquence and fluency of tongue", and the "highest literary standard possible should be maintained". (Extracts 3, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13)
7. When the ideal method for translating is not attainable for practical reasons, do the best possible with the available resources. (Extracts 4, 15)

8. Translations into European languages should be as close as possible to the English translations, and should be translated from the English rather than from the original. (Extracts 11, 12, 14)
9. The translations should be made with extreme care, and with the “closest and most minute attention”, in order to conform to the original. (Extracts 2, 5, 6, 7, 13)
10. Translations must be grammatically correct, and be in a “profound, musical and perfect cast of style” in the language into which they are being rendered. (Extracts 3, 8, 10, 11, 13)

MEB may also wish to read about the Guardian’s unique and exemplary qualifications for translation in “The Priceless Pearl” (Rúhíyyih Rabbani (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1969), pp. 202–3).

Attachment

ADDITIONAL EXTRACTS CONCERNING TRANSLATION

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Thou hast written concerning the publication of some proofs and arguments along with the Hidden Words. Now, since they are published, circulate them among the people. I hope that it may produce beneficial results. Perchance some of the souls who are truth-seekers may get a little information about this Cause.

But afterward, if thou desirest to get the translation of a Tablet from the Blessed Writings, it must be translated by a committee of two Persian translators together with two competent English writers. The Persians should translate, and the writers mould the significance into profound, musical and perfect cast of style in English, and in such wise that the musical sweetness of the original Persian may not be lost. Then the material must be forwarded to me. I will consider the matter and give permission for its publication and circulation. Consequently, rejoice thou that thou hast already become specialized with this permission, that thou hast circulated publications.

In brief, translation is one of the most difficult arts. In both Persian and English utmost proficiency is necessary, that the translator be a writer and use as the vehicle of expression great eloquence and fluency of tongue.

(“Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas”, vol. 1 (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1930), pp. 151–52)

From letters written by and on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

It is, of course, permissible to translate Bahá'í writings into other languages and dialects of languages. It is also possible to simplify or paraphrase the Bahá'í writings in order to facilitate their translation into languages and dialects having small vocabularies. However, it is not permissible to publish simplifications and paraphrases of Bahá'í writings as Bahá'í Scripture.

(13 March 1969 by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Obviously teaching literature and books about the Faith can be written in Simple English. However, we feel that when the Sacred Writings are published the standard English translation should be used, but there would be no objection to printing alongside it the translation into Simple English which should be described as a paraphrase of the Holy Word. Thus, for the people of Papua and New Guinea who have difficulty in comprehending standard English, the Simple English version would be in the nature of an explanation of the Writings which they could understand. In the case of teaching literature in which quotations from the Writings appear, these could either be paraphrased or a Simple English version could be used with the standard version printed as a footnote. This method would also provide a means whereby the people of Papua and New Guinea could improve their knowledge and understanding of the English language.

(20 September 1973 by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

We have noticed a tendency in a number of countries to attempt to translate Bahá'í literature into the current, easy, everyday language of the country. This, however, should not be an overriding consideration. Many of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are in exalted and highly poetic language in the original Persian and Arabic and you will see, for example, that when translating Bahá'u'lláh's Writings into English the beloved Guardian did not use present-day colloquial English but evolved a highly poetic and beautiful style, using numbers of archaic expressions reminiscent of the translations of the Bible.

(7 October 1973 by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Your letter of May 5 seeking further information concerning "Javáhiru'l-Asrár" has been received by the Universal House of Justice, and we have been directed to convey to you the comments of the Research Department.

The summaries given by Jináb-i-Fáḍil in the "Star of the West", volume XIII, and by Adib Taherzadeh in "The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh" (Oxford: George Ronald, 1974), volume 1, pp. 149–152, are basically correct. About two-thirds of this work by Bahá'u'lláh is devoted to an explanation of the "Seven Cities" encountered in the spiritual journey to God. When, in 1947, one of the friends offered to translate the "Seven Valleys" directly from the Persian into German, Shoghi Effendi pointed out that the ideas associated with such a "mystical work" required not only a command of these languages, but also "a deep familiarity with oriental literature in the original and oriental usage and thought".

(27 May 1982 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

With regard to your question about the style of English used in the translation of Bahá'í prayers, we are asked to point out that finding an adequate style in English for expressing beautifully the poetic, metaphorical and allusive style of many of the Bahá'í Scriptures is not easy. The Persian and Arabic of the Bahá'í Writings are themselves considerably different from the current styles and usages in those languages. Shoghi Effendi's solution of using a slightly archaic form of English, which is somewhat equivalent to the use in the original languages, makes possible the use of images and metaphors that might seem strange if expressed in modern English.

Furthermore, styles of writing are changing comparatively rapidly. If it were already found necessary to use a style different from that used for translations fifty years ago, one can estimate that a further change would be called for fifty years hence. One merely has to consider the large number of new translations of the Bible that have appeared, and are still appearing, and yet many English-speaking Christians prefer to continue using the Authorized Version in spite of its proven inaccuracies. Holy Scriptures have a profound meaning for their readers, and to change the familiar words too often can be gravely disturbing.

Books of Scripture themselves mould the language in which they are written. The House of Justice believes that if translators strive to render the words of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá into English in a way that reproduces as accurately as possible the meaning of the originals, that is as beautiful as possible, and that harmonizes closely with the style used by Shoghi Effendi, these Writings themselves will have a far-reaching effect on the ability of

Bahá'ís, and especially Bahá'í children and youth, to use the English language effectively for thought and for expression.

(3 February 1988 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

From a memorandum written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice by the Research Department

The question of which style of Swedish should be used for the translation of Bahá'í Writings is one that, we feel, must be decided by the National Assembly of Sweden after considering the views of those who are expert both in translation and in Swedish literary style. While it is not obligatory for them to follow the practice that the beloved Guardian adopted in English, it would be useful for them to bear in mind certain aspects of the problem which have been solved in English by Shoghi Effendi.

The originals of the Bahá'í Writings are not only in three different languages (Arabic, Persian and a few in Turkish), which have very different characteristics, but are also in a number of different styles. Some are highly poetic and metaphorical, others more precise and specific. In English-speaking countries, as in most others, religion and spirituality are in a phase of eclipse, therefore the vocabulary used to convey many profound religious concepts has fallen into disuse. To attempt to express the highly poetic and allusive terminology of the Bahá'í Writings in plain, modern English would either be banal or would make the passages sound very strange and foreign. The Guardian's use of a style of English that is slightly archaic, a style in which there is an abundance of spiritual and poetic terminology, acts as a bridge between the English of today and the style of the Persian and Arabic Writings of the Founders of the Faith.

There have been many recent attempts to translate the Bible into modern English, but it must be remembered here that the Hebrew of the Old Testament is far more blunt and straightforward than the Persian and Arabic of the Bahá'í Writings, while the koine Greek of most of the New Testament is, likewise, the everyday speech of that time. Translations of the Bible, therefore, do not present an exact parallel to translations of the Bahá'í Writings.

(1 July 1985)

COMMITTEES FOR TRANSLATING BAHÁ'Í SACRED WRITINGS

Extracts from utterances and the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Truly translation is very difficult. One has to have the utmost proficiency in science and religion, in divine wisdom, in the current trends of thought in Europe, and in philosophical and scientific terms.

(From a talk—translated from the Persian)

[1]

The translation of ... is of the utmost difficulty. It must be translated by a committee who are exceedingly efficient both in Persian and English, exercising the closest and most minute attention. Otherwise the text would not become intelligible. The same rule applieth to other Writings and Tablets. For the present the organization of such a committee of translators is not possible and there is no other means than the translations made by individuals. In the future, God willing, means will be brought about. Translations will be made by a committee composed of two most erudite Persians and two learned Americans, all of them having the utmost proficiency in both languages and possessing a certain knowledge of sciences and arts. Then others from among the scholars and thinkers must assist. At that time Tablets will be translated correctly and published.

(“Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas”, vol. 1 (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930), pp. iii–iv)

[2]

...if thou desirest to get the translation of a Tablet from the Blessed Writings, it must be translated by a committee of two Persian translators together with two competent English writers. The Persians should translate, and the writers mould the significance into profound, musical and perfect cast of style in English, and in such wise that the musical sweetness of the original Persian may not be lost.

In brief, translation is one of the most difficult arts. In both Persian and English utmost proficiency is necessary, that the translator be a writer and use as the vehicle of expression great eloquence and fluency of tongue.

(“Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas”, vol. 1, pp. 151–52)

[3]

Thou hast written concerning the translation of Tablets. Perfect translation will be made at a time when a committee of translators is organized. The members of that committee must be composed of several Persians and several Americans, all of whom must have the utmost proficiency in both the Persian and English languages. Then the Tablets will be translated through this committee. For the present the organization of such a committee is not possible. Therefore, whenever the publication of a Tablet becomes necessary, have a proficient person translate it, then circulate it and the end will be attained.

(“Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas”, vol. 2 (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1930), p. 466)

[4]

Regarding the translation of the Books and Tablets of the Blessed Beauty, ere long will translations be made into every tongue, with power, clarity and grace. At such time as they are translated, conformably to the originals, and with power and grace of style, the splendours of their inner meanings will be shed abroad, and will illumine the eyes of all mankind. Do thy very best to ensure that the translation is in conformity with the original.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), sec. 31, p. 66)

[5]

Thou intendest to print and publish the addresses of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá which thou hast compiled. This is indeed very advisable. This service shall cause thee to acquire an effulgent face in the Abhá Kingdom, and shall make thee the object of the praise and gratitude of the friends in the East as well as in the West. But it is to be undertaken with the utmost care, so that the exact text may be reproduced and will exclude all deviations and corruptions committed by former translators.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, sec. 189, p. 224)

[6]

Extract from a cable by Shoghi Effendi

TRANSLATIONS SHOULD BE UNDERTAKEN WITH GREATEST CARE AND SHOULD BE REVIEWED BY ALL MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE BEFORE PUBLICATION.

(24 April 1946 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[7]

Extracts from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

It must have been very distasteful to you to read some of the off-hand and ungrammatical translations that more out of necessity than choice won circulation and were even published. Furthermore, it was always the expressed wish and desire of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to have proper and adequate translations that would not only convey the true spirit of the original but also possess some literary merit. And for this He emphasized the necessity of a board of translators. Such a board it has unfortunately been impossible to form as yet.

(28 March 1926 to an individual believer)

[8]

Shoghi Effendi hopes that before long we will obtain a group of competent English and Persian scholars who would devote their whole time and energy to the translation of the Words and bring out things that are really deserving. For whatever we have at present, even the very best, is only a mediocre rendering of the Persian or Arabic beauty of style and fertility of language that we find in the original.

(4 July 1929 to an individual believer)

[9]

He feels the highest literary standard possible should be maintained in any future translation of Bahá'í writings into Spanish, and for this reason he heartily welcomes the suggestion to refer such work to Spanish professors....

(14 December 1938 to an individual believer)

[10]

He is interested in accomplishing two things—he would like in the European languages to have as much uniformity with the English translations as possible; he does not wish the Bahá'í translations to be in any way a flagrant violation of the rules of the language into which our literature is being translated.

Your Committee must conscientiously study this question, and then do the best you can to have the Bahá'í literature in French meet the high standards of the French language and grammar.

(15 February 1957 to the National Translation and Publication Committee of France)

[11]

Extracts from letters written by the Universal House of Justice

The matter of translation is a major problem. As you yourself know only too well, to convey exactly the meaning and flavour of a passage from one language to another is often impossible and one can but labour to approach as near as possible to the unattainable perfection. Even our beloved Guardian, whose skill in this art amounted to genius, characterized his translation of the “Kitáb-i-Íqán” as “one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation” and he expressed the hope “that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá'u'lláh's matchless utterance.”

The difficulty of translation increases when two languages express the thoughts and metaphors of widely differing cultures, thus it is infinitely more difficult for a European to conceive the thought-patterns expressed in Arabic or Persian than to understand a passage written in English. Moreover, the beloved Guardian was not only a translator but the inspired Interpreter of the Holy Writings; thus, where a passage in Persian or Arabic could give rise to two different expressions in English he would know which one to convey. Similarly he would be much better equipped than an average translator to know which metaphor to employ in English to express a Persian metaphor which might be meaningless in literal translation.

Thus, in general, speakers of other European tongues will obtain a more accurate translation by following the Guardian's English translation than by attempting at this stage in Bahá'í history to translate directly from the original.

This does not mean, however, that the translators should not also check their translations with the original texts if they are familiar with Persian or Arabic. There may be many instances where the exact meaning of the English text is unclear to them and this can be made evident by comparison with the original.

(8 December 1964 to an individual believer)

[12]

As you point out, a literal translation is often a bad one because it can produce a phraseology or imagery that would convey the wrong impression, thus a translator is at times compelled to convey the meaning of the original by means of a form of words suited to the language. However, a person translating the Bahá'í Writings must always bear in mind that he or she is dealing with the Word of God, and, when striving to convey the meaning of the original, he should exert his utmost to make his rendering both faithful and befitting.

(29 October 1973 to an individual believer)

[13]

Extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

When, in 1947, one of the friends offered to translate the Seven Valleys directly from the Persian into German, Shoghi Effendi pointed out that the ideas associated with such a “mystical work” required not only a command of these languages, but also “a deep familiarity with oriental literature in the original and oriental usage and thought”.

(27 May 1982 to an individual believer)

[14]

Translation is a very difficult art—an art in which absolute perfection is unattainable. However good a translation, there will always be those who would have preferred it otherwise, for taste, which is undefinable, plays such a large part in such judgements.

(20 September 1982 to an individual believer)

[15]

MEMORANDUM

To: ...

Date: 24 February 1992

From: Department of the Secretariat

Re: Guidelines for translation

Your memorandum of 4 February 1992 addressed to the Translation Committee was referred to us, and we have pleasure in sending you the enclosed compilations of guidelines for translators.

As to the matter of capitalization, there are three factors to bear in mind:

1. The existing Bahá'í writings in English are far from consistent in their practice of capitalization, and the American Bahá'í Publishing Trust usually submits a long list of queries whenever it brings out a new edition of a book. Therefore, you should use your good judgement when checking translations into Esperanto.
2. Different languages, as you point out, have different rules for capitalization. So whatever policy you follow should not be a violation of the grammatical rules of Esperanto. There are no capital letters in either Arabic or Persian.
3. To the degree acceptable in a language, names and titles of God, of the Manifestations and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are capitalized, and also pronouns referring to Them. However, there are important exceptions to this rule, as you will see from the enclosed guidelines. For example, "me" or "my" is never capitalized when used by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In passages written by Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi has generally capitalized the "Me" and "My", but in some passages, in which Bahá'u'lláh is addressing God, the Guardian has left them in lower case.

Enclosures 2

cc: Research

CAPITALIZATION OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS
[Extract from a Research Memorandum dated 13 October 1998]

Regarding the appropriate treatment of personal pronouns referring to the Manifestations of God, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, the convention to be followed is based on the Guardian’s own guidance and example. With regard to English usage, Shoghi Effendi endorsed the capitalization of all pronouns referring to the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as a mark of respect for the Stations of the Central Figures of the Faith. In a letter dated 22 November 1949 written on his behalf to an individual it is stated:

In regard to your question about capitalizing the pronouns: the Guardian realizes this looks a little strange to non-Bahá’ís, but he feels we, being believers, and having the full sense of the Stations of the Central Figures of our Faith, should do this as a sign of respect under all circumstances.

It is important to note, however, that there are some exceptions to this rule. The following observation regarding some of the Guardian’s translations of Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings is made on behalf of the House of Justice to a Publishing Trust:

Moreover, it is observable in some of the Guardian’s translations of passages in which Bahá’u’lláh refers to Himself, that Shoghi Effendi has capitalized the pronouns when they indicate the Manifestation in His relationship to mankind, but has made them lower case when the passage is contrasting the Manifestation with the Godhead.

(27 March 1989)

We also note that the Guardian used lower case pronouns when translating ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s references to Himself, for example, in his translation of *The Will and Testament*, and in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prayers.

It is also interesting to observe that in the Guardian’s statement quoted above, the pronoun “he”, referring to the Guardian, is not capitalized. The House of Justice affirms this convention by following it in its own writings. For example, in the statement below the House does not capitalize “his” or “writings” with respect to the Guardian. It also emphasizes that “in introductory books or books about the Faith in the English language”, capitalization of pronouns is “left to the personal choice of the author”. We read:

In English translations of the Sacred Bahá’í Writings personal pronouns referring to the Manifestations of God or to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá should invariably be capitalized; in the Guardian’s writings in English his own style must be followed.

Capitalization of pronouns relating to the Manifestations of God and to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in introductory books or books about the Faith in the English language is left to the personal choice of the author.

(3 February 1975)

Regarding Mr. ...’s query about capitalizing “It” and “Body” when referring to Bahá’u’lláh’s remains after His passing, it seems to us that the foregoing discussion will assist him in coming to his own conclusions.