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TRANSLATION WARS:

THE INFLUENCE OF SEMANTICS AND TRANSLATION ON THE MORE-TYNDALE

POLEMIC

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In 1974, psychologists Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer played an identical video of an automobile accident to participants in their study. When testing the participants' memories of the video afterwards, they worded their questions in varying ways, and found that doing so produced dramatically different responses. Asking "About how fast were the cars going when they smashed into each other?" elicited much more dire recollections of the video than "About how fast were the cars going when they bumped into each other?"[1] The groundbreaking study remains a powerful example of the influence of language on human perception.

This pivotal role of language in the human experience is easily identified in history's greatest debates, no less in the five-year polemic between Sir Thomas More and William Tyndale in the sixteenth century. The debate, which has been described as an "almost typical" example of a Reformation debate between a Catholic leader and Protestant Reformer, spanned over the course of three books: More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, Tyndale's *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, and More's *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*.[2] While it is easy to identify the presence of common Reformation disputes in the polemic, the cause of such a lengthy and passionate debate between two Christians with many common views and backgrounds is unclear without close examination of the men's arguments. While the More-Tyndale debate was sparked by the arguments of the Protestant Reformation, the lengthy polemic was primarily fueled and sustained by semantics and the issue of translation, as the two

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[1] Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer, "Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction: An Example of the Interaction Between Language and Memory," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 13, no. 5 (1974): 585. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(74)80011-3.

[2] E. Flesseman-van Leer, "The Controversy About Scripture and Tradition Between Thomas More and William Tyndale," *Dutch Review of Church History* 43, (1960): 143. www.jstor.org/stable/24006069.

men could not agree on the interpretation of a few pivotal phrases in the Bible or the role that Biblical translation ought to play in the Church.

In order to study the debate, it is necessary to understand its context within the Protestant Reformation, which was a period of great religious change and conflict between the Catholic Church and Protestant Reformers during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.[3] Tyndale was most likely influenced by Martin Luther, a leading Reformer; More clearly associated Tyndale's translation of the New Testament with Reformation heresies, even remarking that "Which whoso calleth 'the New Testament' calleth it by a wrong name… except they will call it 'Tyndale's Testament,' or 'Luther's Testament.'"[4] More, on the other hand, was supported by the Catholic Church and English government, which was Catholic at the time. More's first polemical work, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, was commissioned by the Bishop of England, who instructed More to write a book refuting the writings of Protestant heretics.[5] Furthermore, the Reformation was a period of change for Biblical translation. Before Tyndale, the Catholic Church used the Latin Vulgate, which was only accessible to the wealthy and religious authorities. Tyndale's New Testament was the first Biblical translation in vernacular English.[6]

Aside from More and Tyndale's opposite sides of the Reformation, however, examination of their polemic's historical context reveals that the two men had much in common. Scholar Matthew DeCoursey remarks that the debate was "...not a dialogue of the deaf. The two

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[3] Mortimer Chambers, Barbara Hanawalt, et. al, *The Western Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 1999), 425-460.

[4] Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (n.p, 1529), 285, https://www.thomasmorestudies.org/docs/DialogueConcerningHeresies2015-etext.pdf.

[5] Matthew DeCoursey, "The Thomas More/William Tyndale Polemic: A Selection" (PhD diss., Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2010), 16. https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/moretyndale.pdf.

[6] Chambers, *The Western Experience*, 436.

men understand the nature of each other's arguments very well. Nor is this surprising, for both were Erasmians."[7] Here, DeCoursey refers to the fact that More and Tyndale were both students of Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch Christian humanist. Christian Humanism was a movement marked by increased analysis of the Bible in order to improve piety and morality, and Erasmus was a leading figure.[8] Because of this shared allegiance with Christian Humanism and the monotheistic Christian God, many historians find the men's lengthy polemic to be bizarre. C.S. Lewis reflected in a letter that "Both of them seem to me most saintly men and to have loved God with their whole heart...Nevertheless they disagree and (what racks and astounds me) their disagreement seems to me to not spring from their vices nor from their ignorance."[9]

This is where readers of the More-Tyndale polemic must go beyond identifying the historical context of the Protestant Reformation, and instead investigate the forces that fueled and sustained the debate. This force is More and Tyndale's fundamental battle over translation, which they argue in three main ways: the dangers of semantic inaccuracy to society and religion, the representation of Reformation conflict by translation, and the need for Biblical translation at all.

The first form of argument over translation and language that can be identified in the polemic is debate over semantics. For instance, More strongly disputed Tyndale's choice to translate the Greek word *agape* as "love" rather than "charity" in his translation of the New Testament, arguing that "'whereas 'charity' signifieth in Englishmen's ears not every common

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[7] DeCoursey, "The Thomas More," 16.

[8] Chambers, *The Western Experience*, 434-435.

[9] C.S. Lewis to Dom Giovanni Calabria, 1953. In *C.S. Lewis, Thomas More, and Bitter Conflict,* ed. Kenneth E. Bailey, https://pres-outlook.org/2003/04/cs-lewis-thomas-more-and-bitter-conflict/.

love, but a good, virtuous, and well-ordered love: he that will studiously flee from that name of good love...speak of 'love' and always leave out 'good'"[10] In this passage, as well as numerous others that criticize Tyndale's use of words such as "elder" and "congregation," More argues that Biblical words ought to be defined as whatever society is accustomed to interpreting them as; *agape*, for example, would be interpreted as charity, especially paying alms to the Church.[11] Tyndale, however, had an entirely different idea in this battle over semantics. In *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue,* he defended his translation of *presbyteros* as "elder" rather than the Catholic "priest" by providing numerous examples of when New Testament writers referred to laymen as *presbyteros*, writing "Hereof ye see that I have no more erred than their own text, which they have used since the scripture was first in the Latin tongue, and that their own text understandeth by *presbyteros* nothing save an *elder*."[12] Tyndale took a different approach to semantics than More, arguing that *presbyteros* should be translated according to what Biblical evidence suggests it means rather than the popular or widely adopted usage of the word.[13]

The prominence of these arguments has been noted in previous scholarship; Jamie H. Ferguson remarks that "The immediate subject of this dispute is a mere handful of words in Tyndale's New Testament. Nevertheless, More and Tyndale battle over roughly a dozen syllables as if the entire structure of English ecclesiastical usage were at stake."[14] Such disputes

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[10] More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, 288.

[11] More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, 284-293.

[12] William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (n.p, 1530), 16-20, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044024154668;view=1up;seq=25.

[13] Jamie H. Ferguson, "Faith in the Language: Biblical Authority and the Meaning of English in More-Tyndale Polemics," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 43, no. 4 (2012): 989-990. www.jstor.org/stable/24244968.

[14] Ferguson, "Faith in the Language," 990.

over *agape, presbyteros*, and other contentious words clearly demonstrate the vital importance of semantics to the debate. More did not have a religious objection to the word "love" itself, as Catholic doctrine supported both love and charity; rather, he took issue with a perceived inaccuracy in defining *agape* in that way. More believed that translating Biblical words according to their popular usage would lead to tangible and practical advantages, claiming that translating *agape* as "charity" would lead to "good, virtuous, and well-ordered" manifestations of Christian love. On the other hand, Tyndale placed more emphasis on extracting passages from the New Testament than using logic to speculate about the consequences of a given translation, which is consistent with the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* and implies a concern for English translation being as accurate to the Latin Bible as possible. In short, both men worried greatly about the implications of slightly differing translations of Greek words, indicating the large role that semantics played in fueling the debate.

Other times, More and Tyndale attacked each other's translations because they represented religious disagreements between Catholics and Protestants. In *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, for instance, More criticized Tyndale's translation of *presbyteros* as "elder" or "senior" rather than "priest" by claiming that he had done so with the malicious intent of promoting Protestant views on priesthood, writing "Now, as touching the cause why he changed the name of 'priest' into 'senior,' ye must understand that Luther and his adherents hold this heresy: that all holy order is nothing. And that a priest is nothing else but a man chosen among the people to preach...as though priesthood were nothing."[15] A common dispute between Catholics and Protestant Reformers was the Protestant notion that all Christians, including laymen, were part of

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[15] More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, 289.

a priesthood, rather than only select clergy, making it clear that More's attack on Tyndale's

translation of *presbyteros* was representative of this feud rather than simple semantics.

This presence of common Reformation debates in the polemic has been widely observed

in previous scholarship; E. Flesseman-van Leer writes that "...we find the conflict between Rome

and the Reformation outlined clearly right here at its beginning."[16] [17] However, even these

ubiquitous arguments are intertwined with the overarching battle over translation and language.

The interpretation of translations such as "priest," "confession," and "penance" lent great support

to Catholic doctrine, while Tyndale's translations made Catholic traditions appear manmade and

lacking Scriptural backing. Evan Gurney observes that More's aggressive rhetoric reflects this

defense of Catholic doctrine, explaining that "More rails at Tyndale on virtue's behalf."[18]

Essentially, More understood that Tyndale's New Testament threatened the legitimacy of

Catholic doctrine, making it necessary to strongly refute such translations.

Furthermore, More and Tyndale not only argued over the correct translations of common

Biblical phrases, but also the necessity of translating the Bible at all. More countered the idea of

needing a vernacular translation, writing from the perspective of a common woman who says

"'...I would have the true preacher to teach me truly to understand the same scripture. And for

that intent would I know him, to the end that I might, by that I know him for a true preacher, be

sure that by his teaching I do not damnably misunderstand the scripture, but am truly taught it.'"

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[16] Leer, "The Controversy About," 143.

[17] Leer, "The Controversy About," 145.

[18] Evan Gurney, "Thomas More and the Problem of Charity," *Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 2 (2012): 199. www.jstor.org/stable/24422359.

[19] In More's opinion, it was better for common people to learn about the Bible through the teachings of preachers than attempt to read Scripture on their own, raising a strong argument against translation being necessary at all. Tyndale, who viewed a vernacular Bible as a potentially great asset for laymen, took an opposite opinion. According to David Ginsberg, "The Church's desertion of the layman is to Tyndale manifested by its refusal to make use of the vernacular which would provide the layman the spirit-lifting Biblical translation he so needs and deserves."[20] This resulted in yet another disagreement, but this time, over the ethics of translating the Bible for laymen.

These disputes added another element to More and Tyndale's battle over translation, rather than only focusing on the implications and consequences of certains words. When More attacked Tyndale's translation in *Confutation to Tyndale's Answer*, he painted it as unnecessary as well as inaccurate and corrupt; when Tyndale attacked More's opposition to a vernacular Bible, he painted More as uncaring towards the common man. These arguments further exemplify the debate's tie to translation and language. More and Tyndale had dramatically different views about how Biblical literacy should be approached, with Tyndale viewing the Biblical education of the layman as a deserving goal that could only be accomplished through an easily-accessible translation. While this aspect of the debate had little to do with human perception and interpretation of language, it revolved around the overarching concept of translation.

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[19] Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (n.p, 1532), 302, https://www.thomasmorestudies.org/docs/Confutation1-4_2014-etext.pdf.

[20] David Ginsberg, "Ploughboys Versus Prelates: Tyndale and More and the Politics of Biblical Translation," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 19, no. 1 (1988): 49. www.jstor.org/stable/2540960.

Just as Loftus and Palmer's study informed psychologists about the impact of language on memory, understanding the relationship between the More-Tyndale polemic and translation can help historians better understand the conflict. Much of the existing scholarship on the More-Tyndale debate focuses on either the content of the debate, such as its main arguments and rhetoric, or the external influences of the Reformation. Examining the influence of translation may help one understand the internal forces within Christendom that may have caused the polemic. According to Jamey Hecht, "More's *Confutation of Tyndale* fights the losing battle against the religion's own metabolism...From the priest's role in the Eucharist to the meaning of the word 'church,' every issue More raises becomes a signpost indicating the decay of consensus."[21] Scholarly reflections like this one represent the beginning of a new trend to understand the internal driving forces of the More-Tyndale polemic. By studying the evidence that the debate was fueled by translation, one such internal force is understood. Simply put, this research identifies Christianity's inherent struggle with linguistics as a primary driving force of the debate, rather than simply the external historical events that correlate with the polemical works.

Of course, research on the More-Tyndale debate still has great potential and need for growth. For example, the field may benefit from understanding the extent to which More and Tyndale's claims and accusations were true in real life. More heavily emphasized that translation of *agape* as "love" would lead to more disordered expressions of love, such as a decline in giving alms to the Church. One objective for researchers could be to investigate if this actually happened as Tyndale's translation became more widely used. This would allow researchers to

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[21] Jamey Hecht, "Limitations of Textuality in Thomas More's Confutation of Tyndale's Answer," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 4 (1995): 828. www.jstor.org/stable/2543788.

understand whether More and Tyndale's arguments were supported by real-life events or were purely theoretical and speculative.

To conclude, translation played a pivotal role in sustaining a lengthy polemic between two intelligent men who had much in common, and this realization is much more significant than simple trivia about a historical debate. Rather, understanding this fundamental aspect of the polemic allows scholars to begin to interpret Reformation disputes as products of religion and theology's intertwined relationship with language.

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