

IS THE AV DIFFICULT TO READ?

Another look

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Our readers may remember that back in 1997 and 1998 we assessed the readability of the *Authorised Version*. Two articles appeared under the above heading, the first with the subtitle “Some interesting Statistics,” and the other, “A Second Look.” The two studies compared the AV with the then most popular current translations: the *New King James Version* and the *New International Version*. Using proofing tools from Microsoft Word and Corel WordPerfect, we ran comparisons of sections of scripture and summarised the readability findings. The results were remarkable, the AV falling into the “Easy to read” category, scoring only a little behind its modern rivals, and in some areas scoring better.

Denigrate

We did this because advocates for modern English translations often denigrate the style and vocabulary of the AV. They claim that it is redolent of the early 17th century, and today’s readers are at best put off, and at worst prevented from understanding its meaning. In the first of those studies (BLQ number 388), we noted some comments of D.A. Carson, who, in his influential book *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism*, wrote:

“The plain truth of the matter is that the version that is cherished among senior saints who have more or less come to terms with Elizabethan English, is obscure, confusing, and sometimes even incomprehensible to many younger or poorly educated Christians.”

Not content with that, Dr. Carson then quoted E.H. Palmer’s equally unsparing words,

“Do not give them a loaf of bread covered with an inedible, impenetrable crust fossilized by three-and-half centuries. Give them the Word of God as fresh and warm as the Holy Spirit gave it to the authors of the Bible.”

Today’s climate

These strictures are typical of today’s climate, where Bible modern versionism has reached epidemic proportions. The “quick and easy” mentality among Christians, together with publishers’ aggressive marketing, means that propaganda for the new translations is inevitable. Even more reason then, why those who believe differently need evidence to counter this propaganda.

Limited

Admittedly, our studies were limited in what they could prove. In the first, we evaluated Psalm 37, in the second, the epistle to the Colossians. These combined amount to 2,392 words: a fraction of the AV’s total of 773,692 words. Moreover, small samples are not necessarily representative of the whole picture. However, those results at least consistently indicate the readability level of the AV. Further proof, however, would need a third study, based upon larger amounts of scripture. This I have now done and the present article is the result; the findings appear below.

Another translation

Six years have elapsed since the last evaluation, and in that time another major Bible translation has appeared: the *English Standard Version*. The UK publishers (Harper-Collins) maintain that it is the natural successor to the AV but in an accessible form for today's readers. Here is the blurb on the ESV website,

“The English Standard Version (ESV) stands in the classic mainstream of English Bible translations of the past half-millennium. The fountainhead of that stream was William Tyndale's New Testament of 1526; marking its course were the King James Version of 1611 (KJV), the Revised Version of 1885 (RV), the American Standard Version of 1901 (ASV), and the Revised Standard Version of 1952 and 1971 (RSV)... Our goal has been to carry forward this legacy for a new century.”

Its General Editor, Dr. J.I. Packer, believes “the ESV is going to go beyond its predecessors and establish itself as, in effect, the new King James for the 21st century.”

Successor

It seems that the ESV sees itself as the successor to the *New International Version* also. This impression comes from the way it differentiates itself from the near-paraphrase philosophy of that translation. The blurb goes on,

“The ESV is an ‘essentially literal’ translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on ‘word-for-word’ correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.

In contrast to the ESV, some Bible versions have followed a ‘thought-for-thought’ rather than ‘word-for-word’ translation philosophy, emphasizing ‘dynamic equivalence’ rather than the ‘essentially literal’ meaning of the original. A ‘thought-for-thought’ translation is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture.”

This appears to be a conscious comparison with the NIV. Moreover, the last phrase (“influences of contemporary culture”) probably includes the *Today's New International Version* (TNIV) which is a gender-neutral edition, the first instalments of which have caused much controversy among American evangelicals. It is as if the NIV has finally shown itself for what it is and the ESV now vies for its place as the best alternative to the AV.

Endorsements

Endorsements from church leaders lend support to this and may help the publishers achieve it. Take, for instance, the commendation of Dr. Robert W. Yarbrough, Associate Professor of NT at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (where Dr. D.A. Carson is Research Professor of New Testament),

“The ESV echoes the literary eloquence and dignity of the KJV. But in translation philosophy and original-language fidelity, the ESV also surpasses every modern translation available.”

Wallace Benn, Bishop of Lewes, UK, also heaps praise upon the ESV,

“At last a translation that majors on accuracy, combined with a modern, fluent style. It deserves to be the standard for years to come.”

These and other testimonials, together with slick marketing, have already secured the ESV a firm place in the modern versions arena. It is likely that the NIV (and certainly the TNIV) will eventually lose out to it, and perhaps the NKJV also. In this article, I am not so much concerned with the ESV as a viable English translation. Alan Macgregor in his book *Three Modern Versions* shows that it is 91% the *Revised Standard Version* with most of the liberal renderings improved, and that its New Testament is based upon a modern critical text-type from the Westcott and Hort stable.

Readability

This article is concerned with the ESV's readability compared with the AV. Many now believe that whereas the NIV goes too far, and the NKJV is stuck in the mud, the ESV offers the best alternative exact-equivalent translation. Given this claim, is it's English clearer and more understandable than the AV's? Reading the advertising, many will imagine so and go over to it on that basis alone. In order to test the validity of the claim, I ran a head-to-head comparison between the ESV and the AV purely to see how both scored when it comes to readability statistics.

Tests

For the tests, I chose two samples of scripture, one from the Old Testament and one from the New: Genesis chapter 1 and Romans chapter 8. This sublime mixture of narrative, doctrine and experience should provide a useful basis for gauging how clearly or otherwise the two Bible versions translate the text. The chapter from Romans was deliberate because Dr. Packer stated in a radio interview that Romans was the book the translation team “worked hardest over” and which “provoked most discussion.” The translation team wanted it to be a “showcase” for the new version. Chapter 8 was included in a sampler to show how well the ESV had translated Paul's “tight argument” where “exact words are important.” For an additional comparison, I added a similar amount of text from a contemporary book, *The Lie: Evolution* by Ken Ham (part of Chapter 6: “Genesis does Matter”).

Statistics

To get the readability data I used Corel's latest word processor, which is WordPerfect 11, whose proofing tools are the best there is. Its grammar checker (called “Grammatik”) thoroughly parses and analyses the text, providing numerous key statistics. Some of these appear below in tabular form for easy comparison. First, however, a word about one of them, the “Flesch Reading Ease Score.”

Flesch

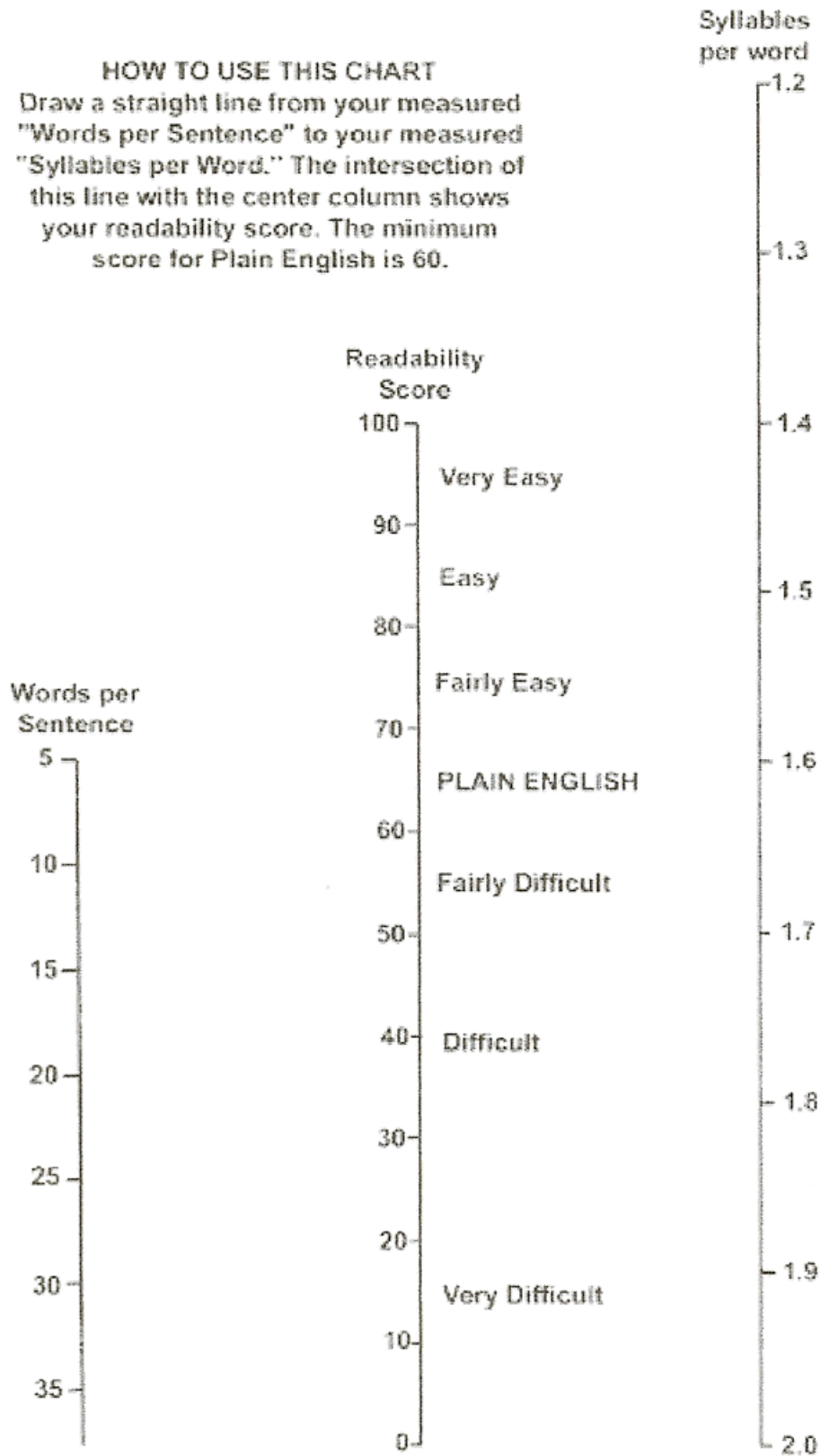
This refers to the work of the Austrian educator Rudolf F. Flesch, who devised a method to measure the ease or difficulty of written English. He wrote: “I developed the formula in the early 1940s. It measures the average sentence length in words and the average word length in syllables. You put these two numbers into an equation and get a number between 0 and 100 that shows you the difficulty of your piece of writing. If it's too hard to read for your

audience, you shorten the words and sentences until you get the score you want." The diagram below shows how he calculates his readability score.

Readability Chart

HOW TO USE THIS CHART

Draw a straight line from your measured "Words per Sentence" to your measured "Syllables per Word." The intersection of this line with the center column shows your readability score. The minimum score for Plain English is 60.



Here are the results for Genesis 1 and Romans 8 in the English Standard Version, Authorised Version, and Ken Ham's The Lie.

| | ESV | AV | TL |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Number of words: | 1683 | 1354 | 1446 |
| Number of sentences: | 95 | 74 | 101 |
| Short sentences: | 42 | 40 | 47 |
| Long sentences: | 13 | 5 | 2 |
| Simple sentences: | 25 | 40 | 26 |
| Bigwords: | 125 | 96 | 212 |
| Sentence complexity: | 42 | 39 | 37 |
| Vocabulary complexity: | 10 | 6 | 24 |
| Words per sentence: | 17.71 | 18.29 | 14.31 |
| Average syllables per word: | 1.34 | 1.36 | 1.60 |
| Flesch Reading Ease: | 75 | 73 | 57 |

Scores

Coming now to the scores, the first thing that strikes us is their similarity. This is evident at first glance. Contrary to popular misconception, there is no great difference between the same 1,000+ words of the AV compared with the ESV – and even with a well-written, racy piece of prose from Ken Ham! If we asked Christians to predict these results, most would expect the AV to lose massively. This shows how much misinformation there is today.

In order to eliminate a possible “one off” result that might favour the AV, I tried the same test on two other pairs of Bible passages: Isaiah 53 and Luke 24, and (less familiar ones) Ezekiel 20 and Revelation 16. The results were very similar again in all categories, further confirming the consistency of these findings.

Number of words

Coming to the details, we start with the number of words. The AV uses significantly fewer English words to translate Genesis 1 and Romans 8: 329 fewer than the ESV. Although not a major factor, it perhaps puts the claim about the ESV being “crisp” and “concise” into perspective. Many give the impression that the AV is verbose and unsuited to today's readers who need a snappier presentation. The AV is not only innocent here, but the test also flagged “wordy” material and reported the ESV to be guilty of 7 and the AV only 5!

Short sentences

Short sentences greatly help easy reading. When they are long, their numerous clauses make the reader mentally out of breath before he reaches the full stop. Brief sentences, however, enable the reader to go from one complete statement to another, each building on the previous, giving enlightenment and encouragement. Christian books vary in this respect, particularly the older classics. Compare the prose of Thomas Watson with John Owen or John Howe among the Puritans, or J.C. Ryle and Henry Law among their elaborate Victorian contemporaries. Usually, the fewer words in a sentence the better. In our test, the AV's words-per-sentence average was just over 18, compared with nearly 18 for the ESV – that's not much difference – and much less than the 33-word sentence you have just read.

Long sentences

A recent review of the ESV in *The Briefing* magazine mentioned “...the long, multi-clausal

sentences of the KJV, that reflected the original languages so well, made for difficult reading, especially as the direction of English was towards shorter sentences.” Now we grant that sometimes in the interests of accuracy this is true. The obvious example is Ephesians 1:15-23, which is one sentence of 199 words. However, it is obvious from the scores that this is exceptional. In fact, in the “long sentences” category, the AV has far fewer at 5 compared with the ESV’s 13. This compares very favourably with Ken Ham’s writing style, with just 2 long sentences. Moreover, when it comes to the opposite - “simple sentences” – the AV has nearly twice as many: 40 compared with 25 for the ESV. In addition, if “sentence complexity” is the criterion, then again the AV betters the ESV with 39 (out of 100) compared with its higher 42 (out of 100).

Big words

In alleging the ESV’s lineal descent from the AV, J.I. Packer said, “Tyndale had an instinct for short, simple words which communicated, and that’s the part of the English language which still communicates best. The RSV went back to Tyndale’s language, and we go with that same preference for short, simple, punchy words.” We agree with the part about Tyndale but seriously question the RSV’s right to be associated with the AV in that way. However, the claim that the ESV inherits Tyndale’s simplicity of expression is not as well founded as it might seem. In the “big words” score, the ESV uses 125, whereas the AV only 96. Even Ken Ham’s verve could not manage with less than 212!

Flesch reading ease

This score is perhaps the most significant. In Flesch’s day, the American government wanted to ensure that patients could understand the wording on consent forms in hospitals. In addition, recent state laws require that contracts of insurance be easily understood by someone at the eighth grade level. They use Flesch to gauge this, and a score of 60-70 would be at that eighth grade – which, from his earlier chart, is in the category of “Plain English.”

Below is how Flesch considered his readability scores equated with American school grade levels.

| Score | School Level |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| 90 to 100 | 5th grade |
| 80 to 90 | 6th grade |
| 70 to 80 | 7th grade |
| 60 to 70 | 8th and 9th grade |
| 50 to 60 | 10th to 12th grade (high school) |
| 30 to 50 | college |
| 0 to 30 | college graduate |

And here are the school grade levels, with the corresponding children’s ages:

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Kindergarten | 5-6 years old. |
| 1st Grade | 6-7 |
| 2nd Grade | 7-8 |
| 3rd Grade | 8-9 |
| 4th Grade | 9-10 |
| 5th Grade | 10-11 |
| Middle school (also called Junior High School) | |
| 6th Grade | 11-12 |
| 7th Grade | 12-13 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------|
| 8th Grade | 13-14 |
| High school | |
| 9th Grade (Freshman year) | 14-15 |
| 10th Grade (Sophomore year) | 15-16 |
| 11th Grade (Junior year) | 16-17 |
| 12th Grade (Senior year) | 17-18 |

We are now in a better position to appreciate the significance of the Flesh Readability results for our two Bible translations. The scores are 75 for the ESV and 73 for the AV. That is again remarkably close and puts both versions beyond the “Plain English,” edging them into the “Fairly Easy” category or seventh grade level: 12-13 year old school children! Who would have thought that the AV would be up with the ESV in this way?

The real difficulty

In the light of these results, one wonders what the real difficulty with the AV is. Much is made of its archaic language (“wist not,” “leasing,” etc.) pronouns (“thee” and “thou”) and verb endings (“eth,” “est,” etc.) but might that not be very much beside the point? These have not affected its readability rating in our test. Might the real problem be over its greatest strength – that the AV is an unashamedly word-for-word rendering of the original into exact-equivalent English? As such, it gives us Holy Scripture with essentially nothing added or taken away. Despite the hype for the ESV (“A Bible Translation that Doesn’t Improve on the Original”), it remains a re-vamp of the RSV and can never equal the AV in this respect.

Therefore, if the problem with the AV is not its English (that has scored “Fairly easy” and suitable for seventh grade children of 12-13), might its problem not be a *spiritual* one? In other words, the alleged difficulty with the AV could simply be our inevitable difficulty with divine truth. The inspired apostle reminds us in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that “the things of the Spirit of God ... are spiritually discerned.” Without divine teaching, no one will read the Bible with ease or understanding. No amount of translation, done in the 17th or the 21st century can give us this. Only the Spirit of God can.

If the problem is not the AV, then it us. We tend to blame the AV’s alleged shortcomings and imagine that a more up-to-date translation will remedy them. All the while we forget the nature of scripture and the fact that fallen, unaided human understanding cannot reach revealed truth. In this, the AV as an English translation is not a barrier. It is a long-proven means, under God’s blessing, to give us “the words ... which the Holy Ghost teacheth” 1 Corinthians 2:13). Our need is not an “easier” translation but the Holy Spirit.

Testimony

The testimony of Dr. Henry M. Morris, Founder and President Emeritus of the Institute for Creation Research, is telling on this point. In his *A Creationist’s Defence of the King James Bible*, he tells us that during his lifetime 45 English Bible translations have appeared and about 100 New Testaments. He has tried to use at least 20 of them. At their wedding in 1940, he and his wife were given an *American Standard Version*. He has tried the RSV, the Amplified Bible, the Expanded Bible, the Bible in Basic English, the Living Bible and many others. He was a member of the North America Overview Committee on the translation of Genesis for the NKJV. However, he has come back to using the AV, “convinced that it is still the best, in terms of poetic majesty, spiritual power, and over-all clarity and reliability.” On the readability of the AV he says,

“The beautiful poetic prose of the King James is a great treasure which should not be lost or forgotten. It has been acclaimed widely as the greatest example of English literature ever written. Apart from a few archaic words or words whose meaning has changed, which can easily be clarified in footnotes, it is as easy to understand today as it was four hundred years ago. That is why most laymen today, especially those without higher education, still use it and love it. These modern translations commonly tend to use long words and pedantic rhetoric, but the King James uses mostly one and two-syllable words. Formal studies have always shows its readability index to be 10th grade or lower. There is nothing hard to understand about John 3:16, for example, or Genesis 1:1, or the Ten Commandments, in the King James.”

This will not be the last word on the readability of the AV, but we trust that these facts may help in the ongoing task of defending what is still the best Bible translation for today.