

# **Signs for words – the possibilities for the literal translation in Finnish Sign Language**

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## **Introduction**

Translation principles form an important topic to any translator, a Bible translator included. As the topic is important it is mandatory to discuss it. In this paper I shall look at the principles from the point of view of a Sign Language project. Further on, my paper will limit the discussion to the literal translation only. The literal translation, as I understand the issue, is an opposite of the meaning-based translation, at least in a sense that the meaning-based translation concentrates on meaning and the literal translation on words.

In my concrete example of a translation project, the translation of the Gospel of Luke into Finnish Sign Language (FiSL), we have a problem with words. The concept of word is problematic, since sign languages do not have words, but signs. One cannot assume a one to one match between spoken or written words and signs in a Sign Language. This simple fact has far reaching consequences on the literal translation.

## **Literal translation**

Either because of my linguistic background or because of my training and research, the term literal translation is puzzling to me. What makes a translation literal and what makes it a non-literal one? When I once approached one of my teachers with this question, she said that any translation, which is not literal, is free one. Her answer does not, in fact, help a lot, but illustrates the problem.

James Barr in his groundbreaking study *Typology of Literalism in ancient biblical translations* discusses the issue of the literal translation in a more helpful way.<sup>1</sup> He points out that there are several ways in which a translation can be literal. He speaks about segmentation of the text, about additions and omissions, about consistency etc. However, his study is not often recognized out side of the circle of Septuagint

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<sup>1</sup> James Barr, *Typology of Literalism in ancient biblical translations* [MSU 15. Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht: Göttingen, 1979].

scholars. Barr starts by noting that we normally use a simplified terminology when speaking about literal and free translations. When doing so, says Barr, we suppose that the terms are clear for everyone.<sup>2</sup> But are they?

Let us consider Gen 1:1 as an example:

Gen 1:1

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (CEV, REB, TEV)

Theo van der Louw classifies this English translation as a literal one.<sup>3</sup> Somehow, my intuition says that it is not. In my mind the literal translation of the Hebrew into English would be something like “in the beginning created God the heavens and the earth” (note the word order).

According to Douglas Robinson the literal translation means “the segmentation of the source language text into individual words and target language rendering of these word-segments one at the time.”<sup>4</sup> Robinson’s definition means that during the translation process the word order and the sentence structure of the source language remain untouched. So, we may say that the literal translation, as I normally understand the term, has two characteristics: a tendency to render source language words with fixed target language expressions (e.g. ברא → created and השמים → the heavens), and a tendency to follow the source language grammatical structure in the target language especially in cases where the normal target language idiom would be different.<sup>5</sup> This paper will concentrate on the issues relating to the structure of the text, the second characteristic element of the literal translation.

I think that there are important limitations for the literal translation. If the literal translation has to do with the structure of the text, and more precisely with the word order, it is possible only in case of two languages that are very similar in their word order and grammatical structure or in case where target language allows flexibility in the word order (like Finnish does)<sup>6</sup>. But if the target language uses a fixed word order

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<sup>2</sup> Barr, *Typology of Literalism*, 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Theo van der Louw, *Transformations in the Septuagint* [Contribution to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 47; Peeters: Leuven, 2007], 64.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Robinson “Literal translation” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* [ed. M. Baker; Routledge: London and New York 1998], 125.

<sup>5</sup> See also Inkeri Vehmas-Lehto, *Kopiointia vai kommunikointia? Johdatus käännteoriaan*. [3. ed. Finn Lectura: Helsinki, 2002], 27.

<sup>6</sup> It is customary to say that in Finnish the word order is free even though this is not quite so. As Terho Itonen, *Kieliopas* [6. Ed.; Kirjayhtymä: Helsinki, 1997], 90 says the word order in Finnish is relatively free, but that does not mean that different possibilities would be equally natural in a given situation. Itonen (p. 90-93) gives four general rules for the proper use of word order in contemporary Finnish mainly concentrating on the order of the subject and verb: a) the emphasised subject comes after the

(like English does), the literal translation can be a theoretical entity at best, because the translator must follow the target language rules in order to allow the readers to understand the translation correctly. Typically in normal transitive clauses in English the subject precedes the object.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the clause “the banana ate the monkey” in normal English would mean that the monkey was consumed. It is only our knowledge concerning the world around us that indicates that there is something odd in the clause; bananas do not eat.

To illustrate the issues encountered with the literal translation it seems advisable to look at a language that is very different from the Biblical languages. I have selected Finnish Sign Language (FiSL) as an example of a language different from the Biblical ones.

### Structure in Finnish Sign Language

As I cannot assume my readers to have much knowledge on FiSL, let me try to explain how it operates.

In 1980's when I started to learn the FiSL, we were told that that the structure of the language was not known. People were using the language all the time, but theoretically it was not analysed properly. Some general rules could be established, but linguists did not understand details. Thus, the textbook of the time said “[d]uring the present stage of the study of the Sign Language, no firm rule can be presented concerning the order of the individual signs under any given circumstance.”<sup>8</sup> However, we were told that the visual basis of the language, or iconicity, if you like, is the guiding general principle. That is to say that because FiSL, as any other SL, is based on visual perception things must be presented in a visually meaningful way.<sup>9</sup> That was more than 20 years ago.

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verb, b) if a subordinate clause precedes the main clause, the subject of the main clause precedes the verb, be it emphasised or not, c) the subject of the reporting clause following the direct speech comes after the verb, if it is not a pronoun, and d) emphasised words tend to be placed at the end of the clause. As he finally underlines, the rules given are linked with clause types that have a potential to mislead the reader, if the word order is not natural. In most of the transitive clauses, however, the word order used is SVO.

<sup>7</sup> According to Sidney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk, *A Students Grammar of the English Language* [Longman: Harlow, 1990], 207 the object follow the subject and verb. The few exceptions to this are related to negation (p. 224), wh-questions (p. 237-238), exclamatives (p. 244), and fronting (p. 407-409).

<sup>8</sup> Juha Palmu, *Viito elävästi 2* [Kuurojen Liitto: Helsinki, 1983], 91.

<sup>9</sup> Palmu, *Viito elävästi 2*, 90. Palmu does not specify what he means by “visually meaningful” way of organizing the information. I understand visually meaningful in a sense that the order of the signs makes it easier to visualize the action. As Terhi Rissanen, ”Viittomakielen rakenteen visuaalisuudesta ja ikonisuudesta”, in *Käden käännteessä. Viittomakielen kääntämisen ja tulkkauksen teoriaa sekä*

Today (2008), one may say a little more about the rules and structures in FiSL. When we speak about the structure of FiSL, we must start from the basic elements of the language. One may think that the signs would form the basis of a SL, but this is not quite true. Signs have structures just like words. It is becoming customary to speak about five elements that constitute signs in a SL. They are the hand shape, the location, the movement, the orientation, and the non-manual elements.<sup>10</sup> These elements are not used in a haphazard way, and therefore SL is not a special form of mime. The sense or meaning of the sign often dictate what the elements are and how they are used. Also, the number of the elements used is limited. There are, according to the basic literature, only 39 different hand shapes used in FiSL.<sup>11</sup> What is especially interesting is that in FiSL the hand shape and the visual appearance of the object in question are linked together. Thus, flat objects (like a book) are signed using a different hand shapes than thin and long objects (like a tree). The number of locations is even smaller, namely 17.<sup>12</sup> Some signs are fixed on certain location(s), but many of them can appear in different locations. The signer then builds up the actual language by using these basic elements. He or she decides what signs to be used and in which order. The user of FiSL taking the full advantage of the fact that the form and the hand shape are connected can even combine several linguistic units into morphologically complex signs. These complex signs are called polysynthetic signs.<sup>13</sup> They get their form and meaning from the context and they are formed on *ad hoc* basis.<sup>14</sup>

The signs in FiSL can be divided into two major classes: verb-like-signs and noun-like-signs.<sup>15</sup> Verb-like-signs refer to space, event, process, or deed. Noun-like-signs, on their part, refer to person, object, or location. Besides these signs proper, the language uses a variety of pointers in its referential system. In FiSL the most common

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*käytäntöä* [Ed. Niina Hytönen and Terhi Rissanen; Finn Lectura: Helsinki, 2006], 37 says, the signer so to speak revives the iconic origin of signs.

<sup>10</sup> Tommi Jantunen, *Johdatus suomalaisen viittomakielen rakenteeseen* [Finn Lectura: Helsinki, 2003], 28.

<sup>11</sup> Jantunen, *Johdatus*, 33 and Leena Savolainen, “Viittoman rakenne” in *Viittomakieliset Suomessa* [ed. A. Malm; Finn Lectura: Helsinki, 2000, 168-188], 187.

<sup>12</sup> Jantunen, *Johdatus*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Jantunen, *Johdatus*, 72-75. His example of a polysynthetic sign is the-moon-rises-behind-the-horizon.

<sup>14</sup> Jantunen, *Johdatus*, 72-77. The main elements of a polysynthetic sign are the hand shape (also called the classifier) and the movement. The rest depends on the situation. Wendy Sandler and Diana Lillo-Martin, *Sign Language and Linguistic Universals* [Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2006], 77-83 call polysynthetic signs as classifier constructions. They describe them as anomalous, but iconic and conventionalised. They are conventionalised in the sense that the hand shapes partly depend on the visual properties of the referent object in question.

<sup>15</sup> Rissanen, *Visuaalisuudesta ja ikonisuudesta*, 40.

pointers are INDEX, OWN and PERSON.<sup>16</sup> I should mention here that other elements like conjunctions are very rare in FiSL.

Even today the scholars say that the fundamental principle in using FiSL is its visuality. The signer must always pay attention to the visual appearance of things and issues.<sup>17</sup>

The need to organize the information in a visually meaningful way has a lot to do with the order of the signs in actual SL. In general, one may say that the verb is the core of a SL clause. Because one should start on how things look like, one tends to put the verb at the end of a clause and other element before it.<sup>18</sup> This is natural because you first have to describe the participants, and only after that tell what they do. At the same time, this principle means that concrete things come before the abstracts. The visuality as the starting point seems to give preference to larger or bigger objects. So, the whole becomes before the parts and the bigger object before the smaller one.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the thematic element of the clause is placed at the beginning.

For example in Luke 7:5 we find the following clause

WE HUMAN GROUP INDEX-6<sup>20</sup> LOVE

“He loves our people” (and not \**our people love him*)

After what I have so far said one might think that in this case the group is placed before the individual, because of the principle that a larger entity precedes a smaller one. This is not the reason for the order. I have a feeling that in FiSL the object precedes the subject.<sup>21</sup> So, the word order tends to be OSV. Also, it seems that the attributes precede the correlate, at least if they refer to the evaluation, size, or colour of the correlate.<sup>22</sup> That explains the order WE HUMAN GROUP.

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<sup>16</sup> Glosses for the signs follow the current standard dictionary of FiSL (*Suomalaisen viittomakielen perussanakirja* [Kuurojen Liitto: Helsinki, 2002]). INDEX sign can point to any object in a certain location. OWN indicates that something belongs to a person in a given location. PERSON sign refers only to persons and operates almost like the INDEX sign, but the hand shape and movement are different from INDEX.

<sup>17</sup> Terhi Rissanen, ”Suomalaisen viittomakielen lauseoppia” in *Viittomakieliset Suomessa* [ed. A. Malm; Finn Lectura: Helsinki, 2000, 147-167], 150.

<sup>18</sup> Rissanen, *Lauseoppia*, 151.

<sup>19</sup> Rissanen, *Lauseoppia*, 157-158.

<sup>20</sup> In FiSL (as in many other SLs) pronouns are mainly replaced by an INDEX sign (pointing a direction with the index finger) making a reference to a location in the signing space. In this case, the signer has placed the centurion to the location 6 (to the left from himself).

<sup>21</sup> But as Rissanen rightly points out speaking about the subject and the object may be misleading. We do not know today are these terms meaningful enough, when we speak about FiSL; Rissanen, *Lauseoppia*, 148.

<sup>22</sup> Concerning ASL on this, see e.g. Sandler and Lillo-Martin, *Sign Language and Universals*, 341.

It seems also that the same principles operate on a higher level than clauses. In Luke 7:6-8 the centurion asks Jesus not to enter his home, but he simply asks him to heal the servant by a command. In Greek (and in the standard Finnish version) the centurion's main theme is at the beginning of the long message, but in FiSL version it is at the end of it. This must be, because in FiSL you first have to evaluate and give reasons for the action before you can actually reveal your true intention or express the action.

I think that the word order in FiSL is not the only interesting issue, when we think about the structure of it. The use of space is also interesting and important. In my example Luke 7:5 a pointer INDEX is used to refer to a particular location in signing space (location 6). This pointer acts as a pronoun given that a words class "pronoun" is meaningful in FiSL.<sup>23</sup> Contextually it is clear that INDEX-6 in our case refers to the centurion, because he is always connected with that particular location (whereas Jesus in Luke 7:1-10 is always at the location 5). The centurion is introduced in verse 2 and there he is put at the location 6, by using the sign OWN-6:

Luke 7:2a

ONE SOLDIER LEADER OWN-6 SERVANT SICK

"a servant of a military leader [= centurion] was sick"

Thus, in FiSL the locations are used to identify characters of the story. In Luke 7:1-10 most of the characters are organized in opposite locations (5 and 6). Jesus takes the location 5 and other main characters are at the location 6.

One can see that illustrated in a beautiful way in verses 7:4b-5 where the Jewish leaders sent by the centurion speak to Jesus. In that spot, the signer turns towards the location 5 where Jesus is and takes the role of the spokesman of the group.<sup>24</sup>

The additional benefit of using locations is that the location system creates cohesion to the text.<sup>25</sup> Since the characters are at fixed locations, it is easier for others to follow the storyline. On the other hand, using locations to carry linguistic information is compulsory. One cannot think about FiSL text without the fully employed system of locations.

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<sup>23</sup> E.g. Sandler and Lillo-Martin, *Sign Language and Universals*, 369-403 speak freely about SL pronouns, but their discussion is mainly based on ASL. In the Finnish literature on FiSL linguists do not speak about pronouns.

<sup>24</sup> On the role shift, see Rissanen, *Visuaalisuudesta ja ikonisuudesta*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> See also Melanie Metzger and Ben Bahan, "Discourse Analysis" in *The Sociolinguistics of Sign Languages* [Ed. C. Lucas; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001], 135-136.

It is not uncommon that translators ponder from which direction characters approach the scene, because they must include that information into the text. In Luke 7:6 Jesus and his companions approach the house of the centurion from the left (audience perspective). This is natural, because Jesus is systematically located on the left hand side (the location 5) and other characters mainly on right hand side (the location 6).

Luke 7:6

JESUS WITH TOGETHER-3>6 HOUSE-6 NEAR-3>6

“Jesus approached the house together with others”

The system using space and fixed locations to encode information turns the whole structure of FiSL very different from spoken languages. Not only is there information in written text that is not expressed in FiSL, but there is also compulsory information that needs to be added to the SL translation not expressed in spoken languages. Also, the way the information is organized in FiSL clauses and paragraphs is based on what things and actions look like. This main principle means that possibilities in varying the order of signs are limited. One may therefore expect that when Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew is translated into FiSL several changes in word order are compulsory making it difficult to speak about the literal translations. The changes actually done can be seen when studying the result, the translated Biblical text. As an appendix for this paper, I have added glosses for Luke 7:1-10 in FiSL.

### **Literal translation into FiSL?**

I defined the literal translation as a translation where each word of the source language is rendered with fixed counterpart and where the word order of the source language is copied directly to the target language. The differences between Biblical languages and FiSL in word order, in the referential system, and in the way information is packed means that if a Biblical text is rendered into FiSL many changes must be made. It is neither possible to have a fixed rendering for each word in a Biblical text be it in Greek, or in Aramaic or Hebrew nor it is not possible to copy the structure of a Aramaic, Greek, or Hebrew text into FiSL.

Finally, I must add one important thing. Even though FiSL is very different from Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew, or even Finnish, it is possible to sign spoken languages. In Finland spoken Finnish and Swedish can be signed in the sense that while signing the structure of the spoken language is indeed kept untouched. There are signs for words like conjunctions. There are signs even for main tenses and cases. But the result of using these signs is neither called FiSL nor Sign Language of any sort. The result is

called Signed Speech. The reason for this is obvious. When signing follows the spoken language, the basics of the FiSL are violated and the language becomes broken.

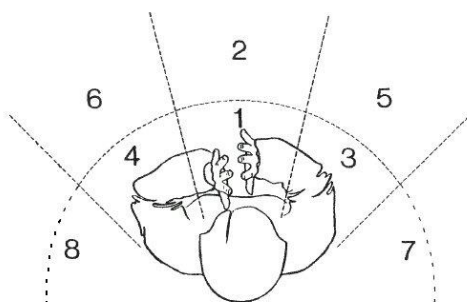
While the Deaf community makes a clear separation between Sign Language (proper) and Signed Speech, we should keep the same thing in mind. This is especially important because it has consequence when we speak about translating into FiSL. If we would try to do a literal translation into FiSL, the Deaf community would probably call the result as Signed Speech. This means that the term literal translation is impossible when we think about translations into FiSL. So, if the term literal translation is impossible when talking about translations into FiSL, we might want to use term only in restricted cases, where the structure of the source language can be reproduced in the target Language without much problem. In all other cases a better term is to be found.



## Appendix

### The Healing of a Centurion's Servant (Luke 7:1-10) - FiSL glosses with English back translation and Greek text

Numbers attached with glosses refer to locations in signing space. The system I use here follows the one introduced e.g. in Tommi Jantunen, *Johdatus suomalaisen viittomakielen rakenteeseen* [Finn Lectura: Helsinki, 2003], 40.



The English text gives a rough back translation of the SL behind the glosses, since I cannot assume that my readers can deduce the meaning of the text from glosses only.

7:1

JESUS TELL HUMAN GROUP HEAR>5

Jesus spoke and people listen

Ἐπειδὴ ἐπλήρωσεν πάντα τὰ ῥήματα αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰς ἀκοὰς τοῦ λαοῦ

READY JESUS GO-1>2 CAPERNAUM INDEX>6

After he had finished Jesus went to Capernaum

εἰσῆλθεν εἰς Καφαρναοῦμ

(break)

7:2

ONE SOLDIER LEADER OWN>6 SERVANT SICK NEARLY DIE

A servant of a military leader was sick and dying

Ἐκατοντάρχου δέ τινος δοῦλος κακῶς ἔχων ἤμελλεν τελευτᾶν

LEADER INDEX>6 SEVANT PERSON-1 RESPECT

That leader respected his servant

ὃς ἦν αὐτῷ ἔντιμος

(break)

7:3

INDEX>6 HEAR>5 JESUS

He heard about Jesus

ἀκούσας δὲ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ

PERSON<sub>x</sub>>5 ASK JEW HIGH-POSITION HUMAN<sub>x</sub>-6 BRING-5>1 JESUS

He asked the respected Jewish men to bring Jesus to him

ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς αὐτὸν πρεσβυτέρους τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἐρωτῶν αὐτὸν

SERVANT PERSON-6 SAVE

to save the servant

ὅπως ἔλθῶν διασώσῃ τὸν δούλον αὐτοῦ

(break)

7:4

JEW HIGH-POSITION HUMANx-6 JESUS MEET>5

The respected Jewish men met Jesus

οἱ δὲ παραγενόμενοι πρὸς τὸν Ἰησοῦν

BEG>5 SAY>5

Beging and asking:

παρεκάλουν αὐτὸν σπουδαίως λέγοντες ὅτι

(break)

ASK MALE INDEX>6 NEED OWN>5 HELP

Please, that man needs your help

Ἄξιός ἐστιν ὧ παρέξιη τοῦτο·

(break)

7:5

WE HUMAN GROUP INDEX>6 LOVE

He loves our people

ἀγαπᾷ γὰρ τὸ ἔθνος ἡμῶν

ALSO WE OWN>1 JEW CONGREGATION

For our Jewish congregation

INDEX>6 ALREADY BUILD HOUSE

He has built a house [= synagogue]

καὶ τὴν συναγωγὴν αὐτὸς ᾠκοδόμησεν ἡμῖν

(break)

7:6

JESUS WITH TOGETHER-3>6 HOUSE-6 NEAR-3>6

Jesus approached the house together with others

ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἐπορεύετο σὺν αὐτοῖς

LEADER SEND-4>5 OWN>6 FEW FRIENDx

The leader sent some of his friends

ἤδη δὲ αὐτοῦ οὐ μακρὰν ἀπέχοντος ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκίας ἔπεμψεν φίλους ὁ ἑκατοντάρχης

MEET-4>5

To meet Jesus:

λέγων αὐτῷ,

(break)

LEADER INDEX>6 SAY

This leader says:

LORD INDEX>5 TROUBLE CLOSE-5>1 DO-NOT>5

Lord, do not trouble to come to me

Κύριε, μὴ σκύλλου, οὐ γὰρ ἰκανός εἰμι ἵνα ὑπὸ τὴν στέγην μου εἰσέλθῃς.

7:7 (no break)

ALSO INDEX>1 CLOSE-1>5 CANNOT

As I did not come to you

διὸ οὐδὲ ἑμαυτὸν ἤξιῶσα πρὸς σὲ ἐλθεῖν.

(break)

[the rest of the verse moved to the end of verse 8]

7:8

COMMAND INDEX-h3>1 INDEX>1 OBEY

I am subject to command from above

καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπός εἰμι ὑπὸ ἐξουσίαν

ALSO SOLDER INDEX>2 INDEX>1 COMMAND INDEX-1>2

And I command solders

τασσόμενος ἔχων ὑπ' ἑμαυτὸν στρατιώτας,

INDEX-2 OBEY

And they obey

(break)

OWN-1 SOLDER INDEX-2 INDEX-1 SAY

If I say to this solder of mine:

καὶ λέγω τούτῳ,

INDEX-2 GO>2

Go!

Πορεύθητι,

COMPLETE LEAVE-1>2

He will leave

καὶ πορεύεται,

INDEX-5 COME-5>1

Or to another: Come!

καὶ ἄλλῳ, Ἔρχου,

COMPLETE COME-5>1

He will come

καὶ ἔρχεται,

(break)

ALSO SERVANT PERSON-2 INDEX-1 SAY

And if I say to this servant:

καὶ τῷ δούλῳ μου,

DO INDEXx-2

Do this!

Ποίησον τοῦτο,

COMPLETE DO

He will do it.

καὶ ποιεῖ.

(break)

ANDx ALSO OWN>1 SERVANT PERSON-6 INDEX-5 ORDER-5>6

So, please, order this servant of mine

ἀλλὰ εἶπέ λόγῳ,

HEAL

And heal him.

καὶ ἰαθήτω ὁ παῖς μου.

(break)

LEADER INDEX-6 WELCOME-6>5

The leader asked Jesus to do this to him

7:9

JESUS SURPRISE>6

Jesus was surprised

ἀκούσας δὲ ταῦτα ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐθαύμασεν αὐτόν

TURN-6>5 HUMAN GROUP

He turned to people

καὶ στραφεὶς τῷ ἀκολουθοῦντι αὐτῷ ὄχλῳ

SAY

And said:

εἶπεν,

LEADER OWN>6 FAITH COMPARE SAME JEW HUMAN GROUP INDEX-1

NEVER SEE-1>d

I have never seen the same faith among Jews than this leader has

Λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐδὲ ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ τοσαύτην πίστιν εὔρον.

(break)

7:10

FRIEND INDEXx-2 BACK-1>2>1 HOUSE-6 NEAR>6

When the friends returned to the house of the leader  
καὶ ὑποστρέψαντες εἰς τὸν οἶκον οἱ πεμφθέντες

**SERVANT PERSON-6 ALREADY HEAL**

That servant was already healthy.  
εὗρον τὸν δούλον ὑγιαίνοντα.