

## **The Untranslatability of *The Qur'an*: moral stances versus erroneous negotiations**

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Translating is finding out equivalence between the word, or the expression, and what it holds as meaning dictated by the context. It is the fact to look not just for the accurate meaning that is identical to the source language in strength, but to find out adequate word and meaning in the target language as well. A good translation is the one that is able to fuse and transfuse the source text into another language and makes the foreign reader strongly believe as if it was the original. This can never and should never be done, if the translator does not respect what the text says and reproduces the intentions of the text itself. The critic Peter Burke assumes that: "Translation implies 'negotiation', a concept [that refers to] the exchange of ideas and the consequent modification of meanings. The moral is that a given translation should be regarded less as a definitive solution to a problem than as a messy compromise, involving losses or renunciations and leaving the way open for renegotiation."(7)

Cultures are different and differing. Subsequently, they reduce the translatability of texts. Due to cultural stances, the translator seems to be less restricted to the text, more obedient to his culture. Such culture-bound makes the translator look at the text as a restrictive other. "The foreignized translation," Lawrence Venuti points out, "is one that engages readers in domestic terms that have been defamiliarized to some extent" (The Scandals of Translation 5). Where does the fidelity to the text lie, then? The critic Walter Benjamin maintains that: "The task of the translator

consists of finding that intended effect [intention] into which he is translating, which produces in it the echo of the original” (Benjamin 1923 qtd Venuti 2000).

How closer could any translation be to the source text? What do we translate: the word or the meaning(s) of the word? There is no fully exact translation, since it dialogically relates with the degree of interpretation, which, in turn, relates to the ideological as well as cultural background of the translator. Sandra Bermann states that “It [translation] requires attention to cultural values, to economic and political inequalities, to individual choices and, perhaps most obviously, to otherness in its linguistic and cultural forms. In the process, it foregrounds some explicitly ethical questions.” (4-5) Jacques Derrida extends more claiming that translation is based on intentionality, and therefore, it could not be exact. He says:

Meaning implies intention. There are translations that don’t even manage to promise, but a good translation is one that enacts the performative called a promise with the result that through the translation one sees the coming shape of a possible reconciliation among languages.” (123)

My paper, thus, raises a very heated debate about **The Qur’an**’s translation: Is adequacy possible in translation? Can translation become a foreignization? The problem with **The Qur’an**’s translation is two-fold: form and meaning. Though the form is manageable, the meaning is, undoubtedly, the big problem. What do we translate? Which vision? Which interpretation? How could we translate the words of God and their intentionality? Are we able to do it? Can a non-Arab understand **The Qur’an** in the same way as an Arab? Which version can we acclaim? Which version can we blame? Luckier are those who know perfectly well Arabic. Their

## **The Untranslatability of *The Qur'an*: moral stances versus erroneous negotiations**

---

knowledge of Arabic and its rhetorics make them appreciate **The Qur'an** and learn/listen directly to the words of God without any bias. Non-Arabs are tied-up to what the translator adopts as an interpretation. Many scholars strongly believe that **The Qur'an**'s natural root is Arabic; therefore, it is a shot of impossibility to translate it into any other language. They claim that God has chosen Arabic to reveal Islam to our prophet (PBUH), and so **The Qur'an** can never be reproduced in any other language. So how accurate are **The Qur'an**'s renderings in languages other than Arabic?

**The Qur'an**'s translations are various and diversified: there are versions by Muslim translators as well as Non-Muslim translators. Muslims rely more on 'tafasir' (interpretations) mainly of scholars of Middle Age thinking that it was the age of Glory of Islam (where scholars conformed to the 'orthodox' of readings ( as Abdullah Yusuf Ali's **The Noble Qur'an in the English Language(1934)**, Muhammad Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan's **Al-Qur'an, A Contemporary Translation**, Ahmed Ali's **The Holy Qur'an**, Syed V. Mir Ahmed Ali's **The Noble Qur'an: A New Rendering of Its Meaning in English**) But the first translations were made by non-Muslims, frequently Christians, who seemingly tried to darken and debunk the precepts of Islam and therefore enabled the evangelists to convert Muslims in Christianity. Alexander Ross was the first, who attempted such translation. His aim was more to criticize Turkish vanities through **The Qur'an** than the translation of **The Qur'an** itself. It seems that Ross did not know at all Arabic language! In his translation, he relied more on the French translation, which, in turn, he did not master well. Moreover, he took his translation from the rendition of Andrew Du Ryer whose translation is full of omissions and of semantic as well as linguistic mistakes. The critic George Sale maintains that Du Ryer's performance is "far from being a just

translation; there being mistakes in every page, besides frequent transpositions, omissions and additions, faults."(x) Among other Christian translators of **The Quran** were George Sale, John Rodwell (1808-1900), Edward Palmer (1840-1882), and Sir William Muir (1819-1905). It seems that all these non-Muslim translators relied heavily on the Latin translations of **The Quran**, except Sale, who gave the impression that he based his translation on the Arabic text. (Irving XXII)

Compared to Arabic, which is the natural language of **The Qur'an**, there is all the time something missing in any foreign translation: rhetorical aspects—as style, euphony and prosody— and the special language structure of **The Qur'an** itself. Arabic has a special rhetoric with a poetic nature, which is inimitable. It has a specific lattice structure, which connects every word, every verse, every rhythm and every rhyme with one another. It is the wholeness of such dexterity that makes meaning in **The Quran**. The rhetoric of **The Qur'an** is sublime, and by consensus of rhetoricians, no imitation can be reproduced in the same language-Arabic- so what about other languages? God (Allah), even, challenged the Arabs to produce a literary work similar to **The Quran**. Can this linguistic richness be captured and reproduced in any other language?

Undoubtedly, there are many versions of English translation of **The Qur'an**. These translations, however, are full of pitfalls and ambiguities. Such fallacies arise from the lack of competence and understanding of Arabic syntax, failure to capture stylistic devices and rhetorical aspects of **The Quran**. So, there are some inadequacies found in some English translations.

The following examples are only prototypes of numerous mistakes that affect the vision and the right meaning

## The Untranslatability of *The Qur'an*: moral stances versus erroneous negotiations

---

of **The Qur'an**. The degree of inaccuracies, found in the various English versions of **The Qur'an**, is conspicuous to go unnoticed. Here are three English versions of **The Qur'an** by, successively, Khan (2002), Zidan (1996) and Pichthall (1954). These versions are examples of translation difficulties and (mis)interpretations of the words of God. Such anomalies are very clear in the following verses of **Chapter "Fatir"** (Verse 13) and **Chapter "Al Baqara"** (Verse 126).

وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾ يُوَلِّجُ اللَّيْلَ فِي النَّهَارِ وَيُوَلِّجُ  
النَّهَارَ فِي اللَّيْلِ وَسَخَّرَ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ كُلٌّ يَجْرِي  
لِأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ذَٰلِكُمْ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ لَهُ الْمُلْكُ وَالَّذِينَ  
تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ مَا يَمْلِكُونَ مِنْ قِطْمِيرٍ ﴿١٣﴾ إِنَّ

The first example is from **Chapter "Fatir"**, verse 13:

**Khan's** Translation of the verse: "*He merges the night into the day (i.e. the decrease in the hours of the night are added to the hours of the day), and He merges the day into the night (i.e. the decrease in the hours of the day are added to the hours of the night). And He has subjected the sun and the moon, each runs its course for a term appointed. Such is Allah your Lord; His is the kingdom. And those, whom you invoke or call upon instead of Him, own not even a Qitmeer (the thin membrane over the datestone).*"

**Zidan's** translation of the verse: "*God merges the night into the day and merges the day into the night, and He has subjected the sun and the moon, each one runs its course to an appointed term. This is GOD, your Lord, to Him is the*

*Dominion, and those you invoke other than Him, possess nothing in the least.”*

**Pichthall’s translation of the verse: “*He maketh the night to path into the day and He maketh the day to path into the night. He hath subdued the sun and moon to service. Each runneth unto an appointed term. Such is Allah, your Lord; His is the sovereignty; and those unto whom ye pray instead of Him own not so much as the white spot on a date-stone.*”**

The three versions, of the verse 13, are dissimilar in so many instances: Khan and Zidan start the verse with the personal pronoun ‘He’, whereas Zidan uses the word ‘God.’ Zidan’s translation, here, seems very plausible compared to Khan’s and Pichthall’s. Though we know that ‘He’ insinuates to ‘God’, still the word ‘God’ gives more strength and accuracy. After each phrase, Khan uses the parentheses to explain the meaning, this I think is a shortcoming. There should be no comments within the sacred text. If ever there is, it must be in the footnotes as annotation. Unlike Khan, Zidan and Pichthall keep the phrases without explanation.

Both Khan and Zidan use the verb ‘merge’ to mean ( يولج ), whereas Pichthall uses ‘to make’. I lean more to ‘merge’ rather than ‘make’; the latter is quite simple, whereas the former is more suggestive and fits better the meaning the phrase. Khan and Zidan use the verb ‘subject’, whereas Pichthall uses the verb ‘subdue’. I lean more to ‘subject’ than to ‘subdue’, because the latter entails some elements of violence, whereas the former shows fact and capability.

Khan and Pichthall get the same translation of the following phrase (ذالكم الله ربكم): ‘Such is Allah your Lord.’, whereas Zidan translates it as follows: “This is God, your

## **The Untranslatability of *The Qur'an*: moral stances versus erroneous negotiations**

---

Lord.” I lean more to the former translations rather than Zidan’s, which seems watered down and its rhetorical effect is lost.

The last expression of the verse is rendered differently by the three translators. Khan makes it as “His is the kingdom.” Zidan renders it as “To Him is the Dominion.”, and Pichthall as “His is the sovereignty.” I lean more to Pichthall’s rendering because it holds both meanings and shows the might of God over his creation, whereas Khan’s and Zidan’s are flat and rather common; moreover, Zidan’s word ‘Dominion’ entails harshness and even violence.

The last expression ( ما يملكون من فطير ) signifies that those who do not worship Allah are surely astray and they are in complete sham and poverty. The Quranic expression refers to "the white spot on a date-stone" which is, in itself, a symbol for poverty. The meaning is euphemistic and is expressed in ‘the white spot on a date-stone’. Zidan has ignored the suggestive euphemism of the expression and has given us only his rendering (‘possess nothing in the least’ meaning poverty). In contrast, Pichthall preserves euphemism, but disregards the intended meaning of the expression. That is, he sacrifices the intrinsic at the expense of the extrinsic. Khan has simplified it by giving two verbs, ‘invoke’ and ‘call upon’, to mean ( تدعون ) and furthermore, he has kept ‘qitmeer’ as it is but has given the explanation between parenthesis. Thus, he has deflected the expression and diluted its suggestiveness and euphemism.

The second example is from chapter “*Al Baqara*” ,  
verse 126:

السُّجُودِ ﴿١٢٥﴾ وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ رَبِّ اجْعَلْ هَذَا بَلَدًا آمِنًا وَارْزُقْ  
أَهْلَهُ مِنَ الثَّمَرَاتِ مَنْ آمَنَ مِنْهُمْ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ قَالَ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ  
فَأُمِّتُهُ قَلِيلًا ثُمَّ أَضْطَرُّهُ إِلَىٰ عَذَابِ النَّارِ وَبِئْسَ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٢٦﴾

Khan's translation: “ And (remember) when Ibrahim (Abraham) said, "My Lord, make this city (Makkah) a place of security and provide its people with fruits, such of them as believe in Allah and the Last Day." He (Allah) answered: "As for him who disbelieves, I shall leave him in contentment for a while, then I shall compel him to the torment of the Fire, and worst indeed is that destination!"

Zidan's translation of the verse: “And when Abraham said, "My lord make this city a safe place and provide its inhabitants with fruits, those of them who believe in GOD and the last day." He said," And whoever disbelieves, I will leave him in enjoyment for a time, then I will consign him to the torment of the fire, surely an evil destination.”

Pickthall's translation of the verse: “And when Abraham prayed: My Lord! Make this a region of security and bestow upon its people fruits, such of them as believe in Allah and the Last Day, He answered: As for him who disbelieveth, I shall leave him in contentment or a while



**The Untranslatability of *The Qur'an*:  
moral stances versus erroneous negotiations**

---

**then I shall compel him to the doom of fire - a hapless journey's end!"**

All the three translations start with 'And', but they differ thereafter. Khan has used the verbs 'remember' and 'said' to express the meaning of the verb "قال", whereas Zidan has only used 'said'. Unlike both of them, Pickthall uses the verb 'pray'. I lean more to Pickthall's version because 'pray' shows veneration and submission to the will of God. Other differences are in the following expressions:

Khan: **"make this city (Makkah) a place of security and provide its people with fruits"**

Zidan: **"make this city a safe place and provide its inhabitants with fruits"**

Pickthall: **"Make this a region of security and bestow upon its people fruits"**

Khan: **"I shall compel him"**

Zidan: **"I will consign him"**

Pickthall: **"I shall compel him"**

The euphemistic expression 'المصير' refers to the hell to which the disbelievers will be driven. God may choose the euphemistic expression 'المصير' instead of 'hell' because 'hell' is an offensive word. So, we have a euphemistic expression 'المصير' and the meaning 'النار' to which the euphemistic expression refers to.

In translating the verse into English, Zidan conveys the euphemism (المصير) but ignores the real intended meaning which is 'hell'. Evil destination is more pleasant than hell. It is taken for granted that anyone who is not from the culture of Islam will not understand the degree of torment, which the disbelievers will have.

Pickthall conveys the euphemistic expression 'المصير' (a hapless journey's end) but ignores the intended meaning (hell). He sacrifices the meaning at the expense of the euphemistic expression. "A hapless journey's end" may refer to the end of a journey. (see further details Abozeid Med Gamal).

In translating the above verse, Zidan mentions only the meaning but ignores the euphemism. On the other hand, Pickthall points out the euphemistic expression but disregards the intended meaning. The Quranic discourse has its specific syntactic and lexical items. Both the word order and the selection of specific lexical items are semantically orientated. In addition, its stylistic and syntactic properties are language-specific and may not be shared by other languages. Foregrounding (clefting) of certain constituents in The Quranic discourse has a special communicative function. Foregrounding is a syntactic operation that places one or more constituents to the beginning of the sentence for effective stylistic reasons. Thus, syntax and style stand 'shoulder to shoulder' to produce the desired communicative goal whose meaning would not have been achieved via an ordinary simple syntactic pattern. Style and meaning are inextricably linked with the former contributing to or even creating the latter (Adab, 1996).

Generally, the syntactic norms of the target language fail to match those of The Qur'anic discourse. Notice the following example: (*TâHâ*. 20:67):

فَأَوْجَسَ فِي نَفْسِهِ خِيفَةً مُوسَىٰ

“So Mûsa (Moses) conceived a fear in himself.”  
(Khan's trans.)

## **The Untranslatability of *The Qur'an*: moral stances versus erroneous negotiations**

---

In the Arabic version, the subject, Moses, is backgrounded (placed at the end of the statement) while in the English translation, it is foregrounded (placed at the beginning of the sentence). While there is a certain consensus that it is often possible to achieve a fairly good degree of resemblance in semantic representation across languages, the same cannot be said of stylistic properties, which often consist of linguistic features that are far from universal Rhetorical devices: Some rhetorical features whose translation imposes some limitations on the translator can be observed in The Qur'anic discourse. These devices include: Alliteration. Alliteration is the occurrence of identical sounds sentence-initially that add up melodic sounds and enhances cadence. This is achieved by the letter 'm' in the following verse and is lost in the translation. (*Al-Baqarah* 'البقرة':114):

﴿ ١١٤ ﴾      وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّن مَّنَعَ مَسْجِدَ اللَّهِ

“And who is more unjust than those who forbid that Allâh's Name be glorified and mentioned much (i.e. prayers and invocations, etc.) in Allâh's Mosques and strive for their ruin?” (Khan trans.)

“Who is more unjust than he who forbids from any of his houses of worship (Asad 1980:24).

Metaphor is likewise the fulcrum of The Quranic language.

Consider this rhetorical feature of metaphor, which is almost hard to render in another language: *Al-Isrâ*“الإسراء”(17:verse29):

وَلَا تَجْعَلْ يَدَكَ مَغْلُولَةً إِلَىٰ عُنُقِكَ وَلَا تَبْسُطْهَا  
كُلَّ الْبَسْطِ فَتَقْعُدَ مَلُومًا مَّحْسُورًا ﴿٢٩﴾

**“And let not your hand be tied (like a miser) to your neck, nor stretch it forth to its utmost reach (like a spendthrift), so that you become blameworthy and in severe poverty.” (Khan)**

The addition of the above parenthetical material helps make explanation possible and is often supplied by so-called explanatory of **The Qur'an**. The translations below failed to convey the core sense of the message (take *a middle position in your life*):

- **YUSUF ALI: “Make not thy hand tied (like a niggard's) to thy neck, nor stretch it forth to its utmost reach, so that thou become blameworthy and destitute.”**

- **PICKTHAL: “And let not thy hand be chained to thy neck nor open it with a complete opening, lest thou sit down rebuked, denuded.”**

- **SHAKIR: “And do not make your hand to be shackled to your neck nor stretch it forth to the utmost (limit) of its stretching forth, lest you should (afterwards) sit down blamed, stripped off.”**

Modern Arabic dictionaries are often at variance with the language of the original, as is evident in the **Al-Mawrid Dictionary**. The basic need is for a bilingual dictionary of classical usage of words. Even today, **The Qur'an** continues to provide a rich source of vocabulary which can be, and is, exploited for the compilation of monolingual dictionaries. Such dictionaries definitely resolve the problem of multiple word meanings for distinguishing polysemous words or for elucidating idiomatic expressions such as the metaphoric idiom.

## The Untranslatability of *The Qur'an*: moral stances versus erroneous negotiations

---

Look at this translation (Pickthall):

(( فَاقْتُلُوا الْمُشْرِكِينَ حَيْثُ وَجَدْتُمُوهُمْ وَخُذُوهُمْ وَأَخْصِرُواهُمْ وَأَقْعُدُوا لَهُمْ كُلَّ مَرْصَدٍ )):التوبة الآية 5

Chapter “The repentance”, Verse 5. ((slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush)) **The Quran 9:5**

Pickthall’s translation is based on impressions more than specificity of this verse. Thus, the translation makes the Muslims very violent in all circumstances. Pickthall should have studied the events and the happening of this verse before translation. I is acknowledged by scholars that these idolaters are the Meccian soldiers, who fought against our prophet (peace be upon him) but not idolaters for all the time. Abdelwali Mohammad suggests the following: ((slay the pagan Meccian soldiers wherever you find them, take them captives, besiege them and prepare for them each ambush)) **The Noble Quran, Chapter 9, Verse 5.**

Abdelwali gives us some anomalies, he finds, in Pickthall’s English version: in ‘**The ants**’, Verse 61 ( (( 61 جعل الأرض قرارا --النمل الآية ))). Pickthall translates it as follows:(**Is not He (best) Who made the earth a fixed abode**)) **The Quran 27:61**. The translation makes us believe that the earth is flat and fix and does not move. Abdelwali suggests the following: ((**HE made the earth a resting-place**)) **The Noble Quran, Chapter 27, Verse 61.**

In conclusion I would say: We must acknowledge that any translation is only a rendering or an interpretation, but not **The Qur’an** itself. Therefore, there is no fear and harm to gauge any translation because the reference or the matrix exists and resides in the natural original scripture of the version as sent by God. I strongly underline the word

rendering because **The Quran** is untranslatable and beyond the rich of human being. In **Chapter Âl-'Imrân**, «آل عمران», we read:

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ  
وَأُخَرٌ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ  
أَتَّبِعَاءَ أَلْفِتْنَةٍ وَأَبْغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ ۗ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ۗ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي  
الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ ۗ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ



((And no one knows its interpretation other than GOD)) **The Noble Quran, Chapter 3, Verse 7**

And in 'Surat Al-An-am' (The Cattle)', we read:

لِكُلِّ نَبَأٍ مُسْتَقَرٌّ وَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ

(for each revealed thing (in The Quran) there is a time for its fulfillment and you will come to know (when that time comes).)) **The Noble Quran, Chapter 6, Verse 67**

The strict literal translation is apparently quite impossible: Every translation is an interpretation. The translation of any word depends on other words and expressions. Thus, any translator must first try to understand as clearly as possible the writer's intent, and then compose the text in the target language that expresses that intent as clearly as possible. Otherwise, you end up with a text in the target language that is quite unintelligible. Perhaps it is 'accurate' to some sense, but if no one understands the meaning correctly, then how useful could it be?

Undoubtedly, the peculiar historical circumstances, which brought **The Qur'an** into contact with the English

## **The Untranslatability of *The Qur'an*: moral stances versus erroneous negotiations**

---

language, have left their imprint on the non-Muslims as well as the Muslims. Thus, it is worth while to have one uniform translation in each language of the world, where all Muslim scholars should gather to judge it and authorize it. This uniform copy must be far from any kind of pressures; the translators as well as scholars have only to stick to the requirements, both inside and outside, of the sacred text—**The Qur'an**. This uniform copy must be accompanied with the original one, i.e., Arabic.

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