The Qur'an: Limits of Translatability

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Abstract:

*Translating the **Qur'an** has been traditionally rejected by a number of Muslim scholars, only **exegetical translation** seems to be allowed and tolerated, that is translation based on commentary and explanation of the Qur'anic text. This is due to the fact that achieving an adequate or entirely acceptable translation of the Qur'an is not the Qur'an and can never be. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to explore Qur'anic discourse, its linguistic idiosyncrasies and prototypical aspects which have challenged the limits of translatability. Bearing in mind that no matter how lawful one may be in translating the holy Qur'an into any foreign language, we can have little confidence in the balance of the meaning to be preserved.*

Key-words:

Qur'an, Translatability, linguistic idiosyncrasies, limits, challenge.

Introduction:

> *"The translating of religious text can be a good testing ground for the limits of translatability" Nida (1986: 14)*

The translation of the Qur'an Arabic text has always been approached with great fear and anxiety, i.e., the

intentions behind rendering the Quranic text into other languages have always been looked upon with suspicion. While, at the theological level, the translation of the Qur'an was a controversial issue, the idea of interpreting its meaning has not been so controversial. Muslims need to translate Qur'an into English and into other languages came up mainly out of the desire of a large number of non-Arabic speaking people who had converted Islam; in addition to the fighting of the missionary efforts of those whose goal was the production of usually erroneous and confusing versions of the Muslim scripture.
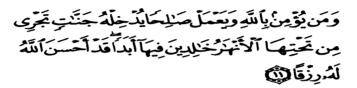
Defining Quranic discourse seems to be, in fact, a challenging task in the sense that it holds a linguistic landscape characterised by a multihued of syntactic, semantic, rhetorical, phonetic and sociocultural features which are divergent from other types of Arabic discourse.

In this vein, Shakir (1926: 163) believes on that concerning the matter of the lawfulness of translating the holy Qur'an into any foreign language. We may get little confidence into the equilibrium of the target meaning being preserved, the same problem may occur regarding the changing of the order and the arrangement of words within the sacred text itself. As an illustration to this challenging task, the common use of shift in *tense* or *person*, for instance, is employed in Qur'anic discourse as a linguistic mode to attain what Longacre (1983: 28) calls 'heightened vividness'. This may be achieved by:

- a move in the nominal/ verbal balance,
- a tense shift,
- a shift from third person to second person and then back to first person,

- a shift from plural to singular within a given person,

- or by using oratorical questions.

As an example, the unique shift in person (full and partial citations from the Qur'anic verse "At-Tahrim" part 28 as follows:

وَمَن يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ وَيَعْمَلْ صَٰلِحًا يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا قَدْ أَحْسَنَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُۥ رِزْقًا ﴿١١﴾

"wa man yu'min bil-lahi wa ya`mal SaaliHan yudkhilhu jannaatin tajrii min taHtiha l'anhaaru khaalidiina fiihaa qad 'aHsana l-laahu lahu rizqan" **(65:11).** This will be translated as: *"God will show anyone who believes in Him (God) and acts honourably into gardens through which rivers flow, to live there forever what a handsome provision God has granted him! (Irving, 1985: 333).* At this level, we have the third person singular pronoun in the words *yu'min* (he believes), *ya'mal* (he acts), *yudkhil* (He (God) shows to the way to), third person plural in the word *khaalidiina* (they live there forever), and then a third person singular in the word *lahu* (for him). This is a clear picture to that shift specific for the Qur'anic discourse.

Thus, considering that Qur'an-specific linguistic features create serious challenges for the translator and translation theories alike, a so-called equivalence remains the target goal in translation studies. In this line of thought, Guillaume (1990: 73) rightly claims that the Qur'an is one of the world's classics, which cannot be translated without grave

loss. It has a rhythm of peculiar beauty and a cadence that charms the ear. From this point, it should be wiser to posit that available Qur'an translations have either adopted a *semantic* or a *communicative* translation.

Semantic Translation

Attempts at rendering, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the target language the exact contextual meaning of the source language message.

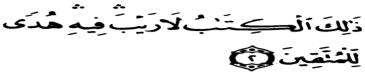**Communicative Translation**

Attempts at producing on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the reader of the source text.

Since Arabic and English are linguistically and culturally incongruous languages, a literal translation of Qur'an, may lead to ambiguity, skewing of the source text intentionality, or inaccuracy in rendering the source message to the target language reader.

Qur'anic discourse enjoys particular and unique characteristics which are semantically orientated, and often create syntactic, lexical, stylistic, rhetorical and cultural voids in translation. Hence, the present paper will shed light only at the level of lexical and cultural voids in translation.
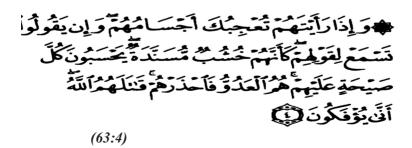
The lexical solidity of Qur'anic expressions can only be undertaken through componential analysis, for instance, there exist some lexical gaps which put across Qur'anic concepts which cannot be harmonized by the target language, such as "*taqwaa*" and "*khushuu*". For example:

This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, for those who fear God". (Ali, 1983: 17).

ذَٰلِكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبُ لَا رَيۡبَۛ فِيهِۛ هُدَى لِّلۡمُتَّقِينَ ۞

In this verse, the word "*muttaqiin"* is inappropriately translated as 'those who fear God'. To avoid the loss of its sensitive overtones in Arabic, other Qur'an translators merely transliterated this expression. In this line of thought, "*Taqwa"* refers to avoiding those actions which have been prohibited. In addition to this, Hilali and Khan (1983: 3) provide a periphrastic translation after the transliteration, '*the pious and righteous persons who fear Allah much, perform all kinds of good deeds which he has forbidden, and love Allah much, perform all kinds of goods deeds which he has ordained.'* Thus, *taqwa* does not mean 'fear of God' only as it is thought by many, but it is a Qur'anic notion which combines many spiritual aspects including fear and love of ALLAH.

It is generally known that Qur'anic discourse is characterised by a considerable number of cultural features whose translation imposes some limitations on the translator. The following example may be considered:

۞ وَإِذَا رَأَيۡتَهُمۡ تُعۡجِبُكَ أَجۡسَامُهُمۡۖ وَإِن يَقُولُوا۟ تَسۡمَعۡ لِقَوۡلِهِمۡۖ كَأَنَّهُمۡ خُشُبٌ مُّسَنَّدَةٌۖ يَحۡسَبُونَ كُلَّ صَيۡحَةٍ عَلَيۡهِمۡۚ هُمُ ٱلۡعَدُوُّ فَٱحۡذَرۡهُمۡۚ قَٰتَلَهُمُ ٱللَّهُۖ أَنَّىٰ يُؤۡفَكُونَ ۞

(63:4)

"When you look at them, their exteriors please you; and when they speak, you listen to their words. They are as worthless as hollow pieces of timber propped up, unable to stand on their own. (Ali, 1983: 1550)".

In this example, the expression "*khushubun musannada"* refers to the hypocrites. From a Cultural stand point, the Arabs used to put planks of timber against the wall at the back of their houses when they were not needed, and as such the planks of wood were useless most of the time. This expression reflects a metonymy for the person who is useless and worthless in the community. So, in order to understand such a verse, one should have background knowledge as far as Arab culture is concerned.

Conclusion:

Bassnett (1991: 29) accurately asserts that similarity cannot exist even between two target language versions of the text, not even between the source language and the target language versions. As ideal equivalence according to Casagrande (1954: 339), is probably unfeasible to accomplish except perhaps in limited pragmatic messages.

The Quranic message will always remain inflicted with inaccuracies and gaps of information which can only be solved through the addition of enlightening exegetical footnotes and explanations.

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