

English Orientalists as Translators of the Holy Quran

ترجمة المستشرقين الإنجليز للقرآن الكريم

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Abstract:

The present paper aims at discussing the problem of translating the Meanings of *the Quran* by orientalist with a special focus on approaches. Though a multitude of Arab scholars studied both purposes and approaches of orientalist when translating the Quran, almost no one of them approached the relationship between these purposes and approaches. Aiming at discovering the effect of translation purposes on translation approaches, we should examine the relationship between them by searching for purposes that motivated the orientalist to translate *the Quran*, and then we study the approaches they followed to achieve their purposes. So, what were the purposes of orientalist behind translating *the Quran*? And could the purpose of the translator affect his selection of the approach of translation and therefore the result, i.e., the translated text? Trying to answer these questions, we conducted a study on the translation of Arthur John Arberry, namely *The Koran Interpreted*.

Keywords: Orientalists; Translation; Meanings of the Quran; Approaches; Purposes.

ملخص:

نهدف من خلال هذا البحث إلى مناقشة إشكالية ترجمة المستشرقين لمعاني القرآن الكريم مع التركيز على المناهج تركيزا خاصا، فعلى الرغم من أن عدداً لا بأس به من الباحثين العرب درسوا أهداف ومناهج المستشرقين عند ترجمتهم للقرآن الكريم، إلا أنه لم يتطرق ولا واحد منهم تقريباً للعلاقة الكامنة بين الأهداف والمناهج، ولغرض اكتشاف تأثير أهداف الترجمة على مناهج الترجمة، يجب أن ندرس العلاقة بينهما من خلال البحث عن الأهداف التي دفعت المستشرقين لترجمة القرآن الكريم، ثم دراسة المناهج التي اتبعوها من أجل تحقيق هاته الأهداف، وعليه، ما هي أهداف المستشرقين من ترجمة القرآن؟ وهل يمكن أن يؤثر هدف المترجم على اختياره لمنهج الترجمة وبذلك النتيجة؟ أي النص المترجم؟ وفي محاولة منا للإجابة عن أسئلة هاته الإشكالية، أجرينا دراسة على ترجمة آرثر جون أربري للقرآن الكريم، ألا وهي "القرآن مُفسَّرٌ".

كلمات مفتاحية: المستشرقون، الترجمة، معاني القرآن، المناهج، الأهداف.

1. Introduction

When the Muslims reached the summit in terms of knowledge and strength in the world, the Westerners came to their civilization and benefited from their sciences and literature through a wide orientalist movement whose spark emerged from Spain, due to the contact that happened between Christians and Muslims in Andalusia. Then, spread to the outskirts of all of Europe. Once they discovered the importance of the Quran in the supremacy of Muslims, they felt the danger. Expeditiously, they started to study, research and translate it. It is rumored that the Spaniards were the first to translate its meanings at the behest of the Church of Cluny Monastery in France, the godmother of orientalism. Shortly, the Germans carried the torch and excelled in that. The Englishers - even if being late - broke into this field for various purposes; including objective scientific purposes and most of which were hateful ideological ones. With the intention of achieving these purposes, orientalists have adopted different methods when translating the Meanings of the Quran.

Although many scholars have been studying these purposes and methods, we have not seen yet a study that deals with the relationship between them, and the effect of one on the other. Thus, the importance and aim of this study lie in showing the impact of the purpose of translation in choosing the translation method.

What were the purposes of orientalists behind translating the Meanings of the Quran? Could the purpose of translation influence the choice of translation approach and, consequently, the outcome? Which is the translated text?

In an attempt to answer this problem, we studied one of the most important translations of orientalists into English. This is the translation of Arthur John Arberry. That we chose it for its modernity and for being studied by many researchers; Westerners and Muslims. In addition to the modernity of its English as well.

2. Orientalism and Orientalists

Orientalism is defined as the study carried by Westerners of the sciences, languages, religions, histories, customs and traditions of the people of the East and their civilizations. In the Middle Ages, it meant the study of Hebrew for its connection to religion and the study of Arabic for its connection to science. It also means the way of thinking, the intellectual tendency and the science that deals with the study and analysis of the civilization, religion, literature, culture and geography of the societies of the Islamic East by Western scholars (2004، مراد). The word orientalism indicates as well the demand; That is, the demand for the East. Not the natural geographical East. But the East for identity. The East for civilization, science, languages, and literature. The East for brightness, light and guidance (2004، بن إبراهيم).

As for the orientalist, it is generally defined as every Western scholar who is interested in Eastern studies in general. He must be a Western specialist by origin or affiliation. As regards to his studies, they must be related to the East. Whether it is philosophy, economics, civilization, literature or archeology. As it is never necessary

for an orientalist to go to the East or embrace any of its religions or speak one of its languages. As long as his knowledge of them is sufficient for him in his research and studies (2004، مراد). Malek Bennabi confirms that the orientalist is a Western writer who writes about Islamic thought and Islamic civilization (1969, p. 5).

3. Orientalism and Translation of the Meanings of *the Quran*

3.1 Translating the Quran or Translating the Meanings of *the Quran*

The Quran is not only Quran by its meanings, but it is Quran by its words and meanings all together. As well as its miracle resides in both of them. As it is impossible to thoroughly transfer one of them in translation, much less transfer both of them. Abdennabi Daker cited in his book "Issues of Translation of the Quran" the opinion of Mohamed El Hajoui that the translation we are doing is not a translation of the Quran in the sense that it is a Quran in another language, since this is not possible, but rather it is a translation of the Meanings of the Quran:

We do not call the translation *Quran*. As well as we do not mean by translation replacing every word by its synonym or equivalent in the other language. This is a replacement. It could be a distortion. Rather, what is meant is the translation of the original meaning of each sentence with as much precision and eloquence as possible. Even if it is not possible to encompass all the great meanings contained in the word revealed by the One Who is All-Wise All Praiseworthy. (1998, pp. 50-52)

Then, we call it a translation of the Meanings of the Quran. Furthermore, we study the verses and surahs of the Quran as meanings, not equivalents, of the original.

3.2 The Purposes of Translating the Meanings of *the Quran*

There are many orientalist's purposes that stand behind studying the Islamic heritage in general, and studying and translating the Meanings of the Quran in particular. Arab Scholars who studied orientalism mentioned all of these purposes. Malek Bennabi classified the "categories" of orientalist into two and emphasized that:

Every comprehensive study of the subject of orientalism must be based on this order:

A - In terms of chronology: the ancients and the moderns.

B - In terms of the general tendency towards Islam and Muslims in their writings: there is a category that praises Islamic civilization, and a category that criticizes the Islamic civilization and deteriorates its reputation. (1969, p.5)

According to the advice of Malek Bennabi and depending on the second category, the purposes that urged orientalist to translate the Meanings of the Quran can be divided into two categories:

"First: Neutral research and scientific achievement;

Second: Destruction, skepticism and deception on behalf of Christianity and Judaism.” (المليباري، د.ت.، ص 31)

3.3 Arthur Arberry's Translation of the Meanings of *the Quran*

This translation was published in 1964 as it represents a revolution in the field of translating the Meanings of the Quran. Not merely because it is considered one of the best English translations with accuracy in conveying the Meanings of the Quran, even among similar ones that were accomplished by Muslims (التمسماني، د.ت.)، but also because it represents a new trend in terms of the approach in the history of orientalist's translation of the Meanings of the Quran. Additionally, its title “The Koran Interpreted” indicates the purpose for which it was carried out. Arberry says in the introduction of his translation that his purpose is to adhere to accuracy in conveying the original meanings in addition to rendering rhetorical and rhythmical styles embodied in the Quran:

My chief reason for offering this new version...is that in no previous rendering has a serious attempt been made to imitate, however imperfectly, those rhetorical and rhythmical patterns which are the glory and the sublimity of the Koran” (Arberry, 1955, p. 16). Therefore “trying to find the best English equivalent for every meaning and every rhythm of the original Arabic. (Arberry, 1955, p. 191)

4. Arthur Arberry's Approach of Translating the Meanings of *the Quran*

Firstly, we conduct a study of Arberry's approach in terms of his adherence to the rendering of meanings and rhetorical patterns to which he committed in his introduction. Secondly, in terms of the general form. Without plunging into the rhythmical patterns, as long as this research will not be able to accommodate it because it is a poetic topic that requires more time and space to be dealt with.

4.1 The Approach of Translating the Meanings of the Verses

There is no disagreement that meaning is the most important element and the ultimate purpose that every translator aspires to. Arberry pledged in his introduction - as we have already mentioned - a commitment to accuracy in the transfer of meanings. Whoever studies his translation would notice that he took a clear approach with the aim of achieving this, as he proceeded to:

4.1.1 Translating by Equivalence

Arberry tried as much as he could to find equivalences in the TT that bear Christian concepts for many words and phrases from the ST that bear Islamic semantics, regardless of their accuracy and fidelity to the concepts of the original. Perhaps his motive for doing so is to give his translation of the Meanings of the Quran a Christian religious character so that it would be well accepted amongst the Christian community.

We start with the translation of the term “الله” as “God”, which is considered among the most controversial problems related to the translation of the Meanings of the Quran. This issue has been discussed by many researchers - Among them are Muslims and orientalists. Perhaps the most prominent of them is the French translologist Henri Meschonnic, who concluded that translating the word “الله” with “God” is a “globalization” of the concept of “God”, while translating it with “Allah” is an Islamization of the world, as it is made clear by his words:

If we say “God,” in translation, we place ourselves in a universal perspective: “God” means that there is one God. It is a universal. But if we translate, or rather if we do not translate, keeping “Allah,” we make of Islam a universal. (Meschonnic, 2007, p. 117)

There is no doubt that all orientalists share his point of view. In fact, all the translators of the Meanings of the Quran – whose translations we have reviewed definitely - translated the word “الله” as “God”.

Many Muslims also discussed this issue in their researches and seminars. Some of them justified that translating the word “الله” as “God” is a blurring of the concept of divinity in Islam, and concluded that it should be translated by “transliteration”, that is, “Allah”. However, other scholars saw that simply transliterating the term in translation takes the risk of not being understood by non-Muslims. Particularly, with the spread misconception that a lot of orientalists drew in the minds of Westerners that “الله” is the god of the Arabs only. In addition to the fact that the purpose of translation first and foremost is to convey the meaning and communicate it to others. Hence, translating it by “God” is the choice that does so. Other scholars suggested a compromise, or let’s say a combination of the two. That is, transliterating it “Allah” and then appending its English equivalent “God” to it (عبدالرحمن، 1421هـ).

We believe that the first point of view is the most adequate. Especially if we combine it with a definition of the concept of the word “الله” in the list of terms. As long as most English dictionaries now contain definitions for the word “Allah” (Oxford's online dictionaries, n.d.). Hence, it has become understood and communicated, especially among researchers.

Even though we do not see anything wrong or harmful in Arberry’s translation of the word “الله” as “God” in the fifties of the last century. Specifically, since the word “Allah” was completely unknown to Westerners, as well as “it had no presence in English dictionaries” (عبدالرحمن، 1421هـ، ص 24). I insist today to translate the word “الله” by transliteration. That is, “Allah”.

Another example from Arberry’s translation of the Meanings of the Quran is his translation of the word “الرب” as “Lord”, as in the first verse of surah “An-Nas” or

Mankind: ﴿قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ النَّاسِ﴾ (An-Nas: 1) which is translated as ﴿Say: I take refuge with the Lord of men﴾. Knowing that “Lord” in the doctrine of the Trinity means “Jesus”. That is, “عيسى”, peace be upon him. Whereas “الرب” in the Islamic faith is “الله”. He is the One, the Eternal. And Jesus is nothing but a Messenger, before whom many Messengers have passed away. Therefore, the best way to translate the term “الرب” is transliteration, that is, “Ar-Rabb”.

Arberry similarly translated “الروح القدس” as “the Holy Spirit,” as in this part of the verse ﴿وَأَيَّدْنَاهُ بِرُوحِ الْقُدُسِ﴾ (Al-Baqarah: 87), which is translated as ﴿and confirmed him with the Holy Spirit﴾. We know that the “الروح القدس” in the Holy Quran means “جبريل”, that is, “Gabriel”, peace be upon him. Whereas, “the Holy Spirit” in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity means the “Third” of “Three” representing “God”. Thus, translating “الروح القدس” as “Jibreel” is more accurate in terms of meaning, despite the obliteration of the allusion in the Arabic original text.

This is in addition to his translation of “يوم الدين” as “the Day of Doom”, “يوم القيامة” as “Day of Resurrection”, “الخطائون” and “المجرمون” as “Sinners”, “جهنم” as “Gehenna” and “الفرقان” as “Salvation”. These are words with Christian connotations that differ from the connotations of the original Arabic words in the Quran.

Thus, whoever reads Arberry’s translation of the Meanings of the Quran finds himself in front of a huge number of concepts of the Christian faith. Hence, he thinks that The Quran is nothing but a copy - as many claim – of the ancient books of Christians and Jews, namely The Bible - the New Testament - and the Old Testament. Therefore, the true Islamic Belief would not be properly revealed to him and he would not be in a position to grasp it.

4.1.2 Literal Translation

Arberry often fell into the trap of literal translation. Either to escape from the repetition that he was pushed to by the verbal diversity in the original Arabic text of the Quran. Once he translates a word or phrase from the original text in Arabic by its equivalent into English, he does not find another equivalent in English to translate another synonym of this word or phrase from Arabic. Therefore, he translates it literally. Or, for his attempt to create an effect on the reader of his translation equivalent to that created by the original text.

An example of this is the translation of the words “الآخرة” and “الأولى” as “the Last and the First” with two uppercase letters L and F, as we note in the translation of the verse ﴿وَإِنَّ لَنَا لَلْآخِرَةَ وَالْأُولَى﴾ (Surah Al-Layl: 13) as ﴿and to Us belong the Last and the First﴾. Arberry’s translation indicates his understanding and grasp of the meaning of the two

words in the Arabic text, but it is ambiguous and incomprehensible to the reader of the translation who does not know its meaning in the original text. Thus, we believe that the translation of “الآخرة” as “the Hereafter” would be better. With regards to the word “الأولى”, we suggest an explicative translation that may convey the meaning better than the literal translation, that is “the life of Here-Below” meaning “the life of this world,” which we believe is what is meant by the word “الأولى” in these verses. So, the adequate translation of the previous verse should be as follows: ﴿and to Us belong the Hereafter and the Here-Below﴾.

The verse ﴿وَمِنْ شَرِّ النَّفَّاثَاتِ فِي الْعُقَدِ﴾ (Al-Falaq: 4) was translated as ﴿from the evil of the women who blow on knots﴾, which is a vague literal translation that does not convey the meaning. Even the verse in the original Arabic text is not clear to the laypersons as it is a metaphor for “witches”. Therefore, Arberry’s translation would have been better if he had replaced the word “women” with “witches,” so that the translation of the verse would be as follows: ﴿from the evil of the witches who blow on knots﴾.

This part ﴿وَبَلَغَتِ الْقُلُوبُ الْحَنَاجِرَ﴾ of the verse (Al-Ahzab: 10) was translated as ﴿and your hearts reached your throats﴾, while in English there is an idiom corresponding to the meaning of the verse that expresses fear and anxiety, which is “Heart in your mouth” (Macmillan's online dictionary, n.d.). Thus, the translation of the expression would have been better if the translator had integrated this idiom in his translation as follows ﴿and your hearts were in your mouths﴾. (ساب، د.ت.)

4.1.3 Sense-for-sense Translation

The words and expressions for which Arberry did not find equivalents among the concepts of Christianity, he tried to commit to conveying their meanings as accurately as possible, so he rendered wonderful translations, and it would be incredible if he did this with the entire Quranic text.

The first example of this is the translation of the expression ﴿وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ﴾ (At-Taghabun: 4) as ﴿God knows the thoughts within the breasts﴾ (Sab, n.d.). It should be mentioned here that the word “breasts” is very accurate as it is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as follows: “A person's chest, especially when regarded as the seat of the emotions.”

Another example is the translation of the verse ﴿فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَانْحَرْ﴾ (Al-Kawthar: 2) as ﴿so pray unto thy Lord and sacrifice﴾. In this case, the translator accurately

understood the meaning of the verse, which allows him to translate it faithfully and not distort it. (ساب، د.ت.)

Likewise, the translation of the part of the verse ﴿فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ يَا أُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ﴾ (At-Talaq: 10) as ﴿So fear God, O men possessed of minds﴾.

As well as, the translation of ﴿وَلَا تَلْبِسُوا الْحَقَّ بِالْبَاطِلِ﴾ (Al-Baqarah: 42) as ﴿And do not confound the truth with vanity﴾. (ساب، د.ت.)

Similarly, the part of the verse ﴿الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ فِرَاشًا وَالسَّمَاءَ بِنَاءً﴾ (Al-Baqarah: 22), was translated as ﴿assigned to you the earth for a couch, and heaven for an edifice﴾. (ساب، د.ت.)

Arberry, in his translation of the Meanings of the Quran, either adhered to the accuracy of conveying the meanings when possible, or tried to do so - at least - when it became difficult or impossible.

4.2 The Approach of Arranging and Numbering the Surahs and Verses

The first thing we notice in Arberry's translation in terms of form is the title "The Koran Interpreted". As if he says that it is not in the status, value or greatness of the original. It is just an interpretation or translation of it. Thus, it was agreed upon. As long as it was exactly what the Islamic Scholars constantly expect from a translation of the Meanings of the Quran.

What is also noticeable in his translation is the poetic form in which the text of his translation was shaped, which is not befitting with a translation of the Meanings of the Quran, which Allah ﷻ has purified from being poetic, saying: ﴿وَمَا عَلَّمْنَاهُ الشُّعْرَ وَمَا يَنْبَغِي﴾ (Ya-Sin: 69). ﴿لَهُ ۥٓ إِنَّ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ وَقُرْآنٌ مُّبِينٌ﴾

As for the verses, although the translator did not change the order of their meanings, except in rare cases of displacements (of meanings order) for the sake of serving rhythmical patterns - according to him - he divided them strangely, as he organized them in the form of poetic poems. Each represents five verses. Hence, he neither numbered the verses nor separated them, except by returning to the line to begin a new line or verse. This has deformed the original form and coherence that marks the Quran in Arabic. Therefore, I suggest changing the form of the translation from the poetic template to a regular form of prose that simulates the form of the Arabic text, with the adoption of a partition and numbering of verses as follows:

Surah Al-Ikhlās (Sincerity):

﴿ Say: He is God, One ١○ God, the Everlasting Refuge ٢○ Who has not begotten, and has not been begotten ٣○ and equal to Him is not any one ٤○ ﴾

However, Arberry respected the order and numbering of the surahs and cited them as they are in the Quran, and did not follow the approach of his predecessors such as J. M. Rodwell, who rearranged the surahs in chronological order according to the chronological revelation, starting with Surat Al-'Alaq and ending with Surat Al-Ma'idah, claiming that this arrangement depicts a clear impression for the biography of the Prophet ﷺ (عبدالرحمن، 1421 هـ).

5. Conclusion

We end up our study of Arthur Arberry's translation of the Meanings of the Quran with the results we concluded, which are: Arberry's purpose was to complete a translation of the Meanings of the Quran that differs from all the previous translations of the orientalist, as it aimed to adhere to the meanings of the Arabic Quranic text without any distortion or deformation. Thus, he adopted a new approach that no one of the preceding orientalist translators of the Meanings of the Quran approached, whose main focus was on equivalent translation, literal translation and sense-for-sense translation. Consequently, he committed to accuracy in conveying meanings as much as possible, which allowed him to achieve an acceptable translation with as much fidelity and loyalty as those that were accomplished by Muslim translators. Therefore, not all the purposes of orientalist are malicious. As there exist orientalist whose purposes are purely objective and scientific. Actually, some of them have no purpose other than serving scientific research. Arberry's translation could be a basis for a good translation of the Meanings of the Quran if it would be subjected to the following corrections: A) Correcting some errors that the translator committed when translating by Christian equivalents and literal translation, such as transliterating the word "الله" as "Allah" instead of translating it as "God", as did most of the Muslim translators of the Meanings of the Quran. B) Changing the translation form from the poetic form to a regular prose form that simulates the form of the Arabic Quranic text, with the adoption of a division and numbering of the original verses.

From all that precedes, we conclude that the accuracy and fidelity of the translation are a result of the relevance of the approach, and that the relevance of the approach is a result of the objectiveness of the purpose, or in other words, If the purpose would be adequate, the approach would be adequate, and if the approach would be adequate, the translation would be adequate.

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