

Some Linguistic Difficulties in Translating the Holy Quran from Arabic into English

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Abstract—This paper identifies the linguistic difficulties in translating the Holy Quran. For Muslims, the Quran is the word of Allah. It contains devotions and instructions that are full of both literal and figurative styles. These figures of speech constitute an obstacle in translating the Quran into English. This article attempts to elaborate some lexical, syntactic and semantic problems and supports the argument with examples of verses from the Quran.

Index Terms—Holy Quran, meanings, problems, translation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Holy Quran employs many stylistic, linguistic and rhetorical features that result in an effective and sublime style. This use of linguistic and rhetorical features challenges the translators of the Holy Quran, especially when translating such literary devices metaphor, assonance, epithet, irony, repetition, polysemy, metonymy, simile, synonymy and homonymy [1]-[10]. The following is a review of some stylistic and linguistic difficulties in translating the Holy Quran into English.

II. LINGUISTIC DIFFICULTIES

Translating the Holy Quran from Arabic into other languages is accompanied by many linguistic problems, as no two languages are identical either in the meaning given to the corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences. Lexical, syntactic and semantic problems arise when translating the meaning of the Holy Quran into English.

A. Lexical Problems

The major problem encountered by the translator of the Quran is the difficulty in rendering some lexical items. One of lexical problems in translating the Holy Quran is the lack of equivalence or the absence of the equivalent of some Islamic terms. These terms have no direct counterpart in English, compelling the translator to convey them in a communicative manner. The following are some examples of these Islamic terms: *taqwā* (piety – تقوى), *kufir* (disbelief – كفر), *shirk* (associating other gods with God – شرك), *haq* (truth – حق), *ma'rūf* (charity – معروف), *munkar* (wrong – منكر), *ghaib* (the unseen/unknown – غيب), *zakāh* (alms giving – زكاة) and *tāwbah* (repentance – توبة). The English translations of these terms only give approximate meanings.

They do not convey the full semantic and liturgical scope of the Quranic terms (Elimam, 2009, p. 40).

B. Syntactic problems

The many differences between Arabic and English cause various syntactic problems when translating the Holy Quran to English. Tense is an obvious syntactic problem that translators usually encounter in translating the Holy Quran. Tense means the 'grammatical realisation of location in time' and how location in time can be expressed in language (Sadiq, 2010, p. 20). In translating the Holy Quran, tense and verb form should be guided by the overall context and by stylistic considerations.

According to Abdel-Haleem [2], in the Quran, there is a shift from the past tense to the imperfect tense to achieve an effect, which can pose some problems in translation. For example,

- (إِذْ جَاءُوكُم مِّن فَوْقِكُمْ وَمِنْ أَسْفَلَ مِنكُمْ وَإِذْ زَاغَتِ الْأَبْصَارُ وَبَلَغَتِ الْقُلُوبُ الْحَنَاجِرَ وَتَظُنُّونَ بِاللَّهِ الظُّنُونًا) (الأحزاب: 10)
- Behold! They **came on you** from above you and from below you, and behold, the eyes **became dim** and the hearts **gaped up** to the throats, and ye imagined various (vain) **thoughts** about Allah! (Yusuf Ali's Translation, 2000) (Al-Aḥzāb 33:10)

The verbs (زَاغَتِ) 'comes against you', (جَاءُوكُم) 'grew wild' and (وَبَلَغَتِ) 'reached' are in the past tense, but the verb (وَتَظُنُّونَ) 'think' shifts to the present tense. This shift is for the purpose of conjuring an important action in the mind as if it were happening in the present. Tenses, in Arabic or in the Holy Quran, cannot be conveyed literally. In some cases, they need to shift to convey the intended meaning to the target audience.

C. Semantic Problems

Translators encounter many semantic problems when they translate the Holy Quran to English. In this section, some of the semantic features that pose semantic difficulty in translating the Quran will be reviewed.

D. Metaphor

Metaphor is as 'a word or phrase used to describe something else, in a way that is different from its normal use, in order to show that the two things have the same qualities and to make the description more powerful', (Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary, 2010, p. 965). The use of metaphor in the Quran, along with other rhetorical usages, is a feature of the Quranic text. Therefore, translators should not ignore its use when attempting to translate the Quranic text (Al-Misned, 2001, p. 145). Consider this example:

- {وَتَرَى الْارْضَ هَامِدَةً فَاِذَا اُنْزِلْنَا عَلَيْهَا الْمَاءَ اهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ وَأَنْبَتَتْ مِنْ

كُلُّ زَوْجٍ بَهِيْجٍ { [الحج : 5]

- Thou seest the earth **barren and lifeless**, but when we pour down rain on it, it is **stirred (to life)**, it **swells** and it puts forth every kind of beautiful growth in pairs. (Yusuf Ali's translation, 2000) (Surah al-Hajj: 5).

The trembling of the earth after a long quiescence is compared to an animal that calms down after moving. Here, the Almighty God borrows some features from an animal to describe what happens to the earth after it rains. In this case, the literal translation cannot convey the exact meaning of the verse to the audience. To show how the earth (*stirred and swells*) these features for animals, we need to use communicative translation or paraphrasing to convey the intended meaning, the features, and the context of the verse. The following is another example:

- چڳ گڳ گڱ گڻ گں ن ن ن ن ن ن ن ن ن ن چيوسف : ۹
- Kill you Joseph, or cast him forth into some land, that **your father's face may be free for you**, and thereafter you may be a righteous people. (Arberry's Translation) (Surah Yusuf 12:9)

Arberry's literal translation of the metaphorical expression (**فَكَفَّرَ بِوَجْهِكَ**) is completely out of context. Therefore, the recipient may not comprehend the literal translation (**your father's face may be free for you**). The metaphorical expression in the above verse means that the attention and care of the Prophet Jacob will be passed on to his sons after killing Joseph, who received more care from his father.

To address the problem of translating a metaphor from the Holy Quran, Almisend (2001) investigated how translators interpret the metaphors in Surah Al-Hajj. He found that the appropriate way to translate the metaphor is to explain or paraphrase the translation to make it more comprehensive for the target audience.

E. Metonymy

Newmark (1988, p. 125) points out that metonymy occurs ‘where the name of an object is transferred to take the place of something else with which it is associated’. This substitution is conditioned by the existence of a contiguity relation between the literal and figurative meanings and the existence of an implicit clue indicating that the literal meaning is not intended. Metonymy in the Holy Quran is not a useless substitution because it usually serves a purpose. Consider this example of metonymy from the Holy Quran:

- { وَأَرْسَلْنَا السَّمَاءَ عَلَيْهِمْ مِطْرًا } [الأعام : 6]
- For whom we **poured out rain from the skies** in abundance. (Yusuf Ali's translation, 2000) (Surah al-An'ām 6:6)

In this verse, the word السماء (*asāmā* – the sky) is used to refer to the intended meaning ‘rain’, which serves as an indication of the heaviness of the rain. Arberry translated this verse as follows:

- ...and how we **loosed** heaven upon them in torrents...

Arberry adopted literal translation to convey the verse, but he failed to express the metonymic phrase (وَأَرْسَلْنَا السَّمَاءَ), which does not mean (*loosed heaven*). Instead, it means

‘we sent or poured heavy rain upon them’.

Al-Salem (2008) studied the ways of translating metonymy in the Holy Quran. She found that the best method to translate metonymy in the Quran in most cases is literal translation. However, the translation still depends on the type of metonymy and the type of clue.

F. Ellipsis

According to al-Sāmīrāyī (1983), ellipsis refers to the omission of some parts of a sentence that can be understood either from the surrounding text or the situation itself. In the translation of the Holy Quran, due to the way English uses ellipsis, it is sometimes necessary to add the elided words (which usually appear in brackets) to complete a sentence in the translation. Sadiq (2010, p. 33) claims that the language of the Holy Quran has many examples of ellipsis. For example,

- {وَأَسْأَلُ الْقَرْيَةَ الَّتِي كُنَّا فِيهَا وَالْغَيْرَ الَّتِي أَقْبَلْنَا فِيهَا وَإِنَّا لَصَادِقُونَ}
- **Ask at the town** where we have been and the caravan in which we returned, and (you will find) we are indeed telling the truth. (Yusuf Ali's translation, 2000) (Surah Yūsuf 12: 82)

In this verse, there is a deletion or ellipsis of the word (people). The complete sentence can be formed as (وأَسأل أَهْلَ الْقَرْيَةِ - *ask the people in the town*) , but the word people is deleted, as its deletion will not affect or change the meaning of the verse. However, in English, it is better to retrieve the deleted word to understand the deep meaning of the verse. Literal translation or word-for-word translation is not applicable here.

G. Polysemy

Polysemy is one of the semantic and linguistic features of the Holy Quran. Kalakattawi (2005, p.4) defines polysemy as a phenomenon in which a word has several different meanings that are closely related to each other. The translator will encounter obvious difficulty when he/she tries to convey the intended meaning of the polysemous words because he/she will be confused by the various meanings and senses of these words.

The Holy Quran features many polysemic words in its structure. For instance, the word *ūmmah* (أُمَّة - people) has nine polysemic meanings. It can mean a period of time, as in surah Yusuf:

- (وَقَالَ الَّذِي نَجَا مِنْهُمَا وَادَّكَرَ بَعْدَ مَهٍ أَنَا أَنبَأْتُكُم بِأَيِّهِ فَأَرْسِلُونْ)
- But the man who had been released, one of the two (who had been in prison) and who now bethought him after **(so long) a space of time**, said: ‘I will tell you the truth of its interpretation: send ye me (therefore)’. (Yusuf Ali’s Translation, 2000) (Surah Yusuf 12:45)

However, in some cases, the word *ūmmah* refers to the leader of the people who teaches or guides the believers to the right path in their religion and life, as in surah al-Nahl:

- (إِنَّ إِبْرَاهِيمَ كَانَ أُمَّةً قَانِتًا لِلَّهِ حَنِيفًا وَلَمْ يَكُ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ)
- Abraham was **indeed a model**, devoutly obedient to Allah, (and) true in Faith, and he joined not gods with Allah. (Yusuf Ali's Translation, 2000) (Sura Al-Nahl 16:120)

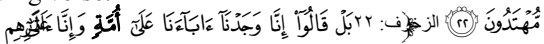
Arberry (1964) translated this verse as follows:

- (Surely, **Abraham was a nation** obedient unto God,

a man of pure faith and no idolater.)

Arberry's translation is completely out of context and meaning. As the word (*ūmmah* - أمة) refers to man educated in the Islamic rules and who teaches these rules to the people, it does not refer to (nation).

In other polysemic meanings, the word (*ūmmah* - أمة) refers to a religion that some people follow, as in the following verse:

- 
- Nay, but they say, 'We found our fathers upon a community, and we are guided upon their traces'.

(Arberry's translation, 1982) (Az-Zūkhurf, 43:22)

Arberry used literal translation to render the meaning of this verse. However, his translation is not communicative. It does not express the polysemic meaning of word (*ūmmah*), which means (religion or beliefs), not (a community) as he conveyed.

In this respect, the translator must be aware and understand the phenomenon of polysemy in the Quran to translate better the intended meaning of the verses to the target audience.

III. CONCLUSION

Clearly, the linguistic and rhetorical features of the Holy Quran continue to challenge translators who struggle to convey the intended meaning of the Quranic verses. The translator must depend on a number of dictionaries in both Arabic and English to determine the specific meaning of the words. The translator must also consult the various commentaries of the Quran to obtain the appropriate interpretation of the Quranic verses. This study recommends that the translation of the Holy Quran should be conducted by a committee that includes experts in the language, culture, history and science of the Quran.

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