

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), *kufr* (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 جَاءُوكُمْ مِنْ فَوْقِكُمْ وَمِنْ أَسْفَلَ مِنْكُمْ وَإِذْ زَاغَتِ الْأَبْصَارُ وَبَلَغَتِ الْقُلُوبُ الْحَنَاجِرَ وَتَظُنُّونَ بِاللَّهِ الظُّنُونَا) (الاحزاب: 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 (جاءوكم) 'comes against you', (زاعت) 'grew wild' and (ولیغت) 'reached' are in the past tense, but the verb (وتظنون) '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 الْآرْضَ هَامِدَةً فِإِذَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا الْمَاءَ اهْتَرَّتْ وَرَبَّتْ وَأَنْبَتَتْ مِنْ

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 (*أمة* – *ūmmah*) refers to a religion that some people follow, as in the following verse:

- **مُهْتَدُونَ** ﴿٢٢﴾ الزخرف: ٢٢ بَلْ قَالُوا إِنَّا وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا عَلَىٰ مِثْلِ هَذَا وَإِنَّا لَنَاطِقِينَ
- Nay, but they say, 'We found our fathers upon a community, and we are guided upon their traces'.

(Arberry's translation, 1982) (Az-Zūkhūrīf, 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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